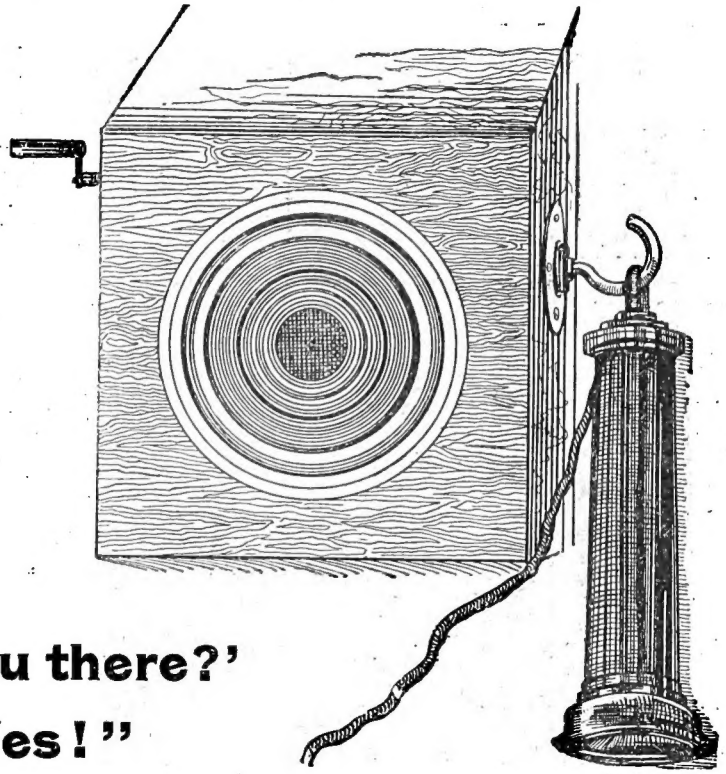
CHRISTMAS WEEK DOUBLE NUMBER.

SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

No. 417. FOR WEEK ENDING DECEMBER 26TH, 1896. [TWOPENCE.

TELEPHONE-Y STORY.



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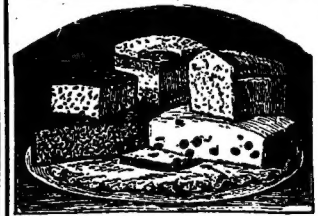

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THE DOUBLE CHRISTMAS NUMBER OF

SHORT STORIES

THE EDITOR AND STAFF SEND YOU CHRISTMAS GREETINGS

No. 417.] [TWOPENCE.

EDITED BY

C. ARTHUR PEARSON.

For the Week ending Dec. 26th, 1896.

Treasure Trove.

BY JOHN K. LEYS.

Author of "The Tenth of June," etc., etc.

MR. PERCY ALGERNON GRIBBLE, junior invoice-clerk in the firm of Messrs. White, Spilliter and Co., of Little Britain, had changed his lodgings. Punctually at a quarter past six one October evening, Mr. Gribble left the office, and for the first time set out, not for the far-off wilds of Brixton, but for the more strictly Metropolitan neighbourhood of Pentonville.

The young man was very much like any other of a thousand young men in his class of life—better than some, not so good as others. He fancied that on the whole he was rather good-looking, the truth being that his short and stumpy figure, his colourless face, and commonplace features prevented even his most partial friends from considering him good-looking. But it was in the domain of intellect that Mr. Gribble conceived that his true claim to distinction lay. Ever since he could spell out of a

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child's toy-book he had been extremely fond of stories, and in later years he had been a ravenous devourer of the romances of M. Gaboriau, and his many English imitators. These tales had wrought in his brain very much as the tales of chivalry wrought in the brain of Don Quixote, of immortal memory, though not perhaps to so marked a degree. He longed to be the discoverer of the mystery. He could not refrain from haunting the scene of any notorious crime, and indulging in the delicious fancy that he was a detective engaged in unearthing the criminal, and in possession of a clue which was invisible to all eyes but his own.

He had even meditated applying for employment at the Criminal Investigation Department, but refrained, alleging to himself as a reason for not doing so, that so long as the Department was kept by a penurious government at its present level it really was not worthy of the attention of a gentleman.

The set of apartments which Mr. Gribble was about to occupy consisted of a small sitting-room, and a yet smaller bedroom which opened out of it. The furniture of both rooms was cheap and scanty; but opposite the fire in the sitting-room, with its back to the wall, stood an old-fashioned sofa of such generous size that the sight of it at once inclined Mr. Gribble to take the rooms, so that he might have the right of resting in the evening in its ample embrace. It was only horsehair, and entirely destitute of springs, but it was both long and deep, and Mr. Gribble sagely reflected that in a sofa no springs are better than broken ones. So the rooms were taken, very much on account of the promises made by the sofa; and on the first night of his residence in his new quarters, Mr. Gribble, having finished his evening meal, drew the table bearing the lamp up to the sofa, pulled out a novel that had been recommended to him as having a first-rate mystery in it, lighted a cigarette, and threw himself down upon the sofa with the intention of abandoning himself to the intellectual dissipation his soul loved.

Like most anticipated treats, however, the apples were not quite so good to the taste as they had seemed to the eye. The cigarette was of inferior flavour—the tale, like so many others, belied its title—the sofa was not only hard, but positively lumpy. Mr. Gribble dropped his book, and in spite of the unkindly nature of his couch, he presently fell asleep.

His sleep was uneasy, and disturbed by confused, nightmare-like dreams. The story he had been reading had been about a buried treasure, and this subject mixed itself up with fancies that must have come from recollections of the Arabian Nights. He thought he had reached the Valley of Diamonds, and was lying on a mound of large pebbles, which bruised his body all over; but some invisible power held him down to his stony bed, so that he could not rise

At length he awoke, and mechanically fell to rubbing his leg, which was positively paining him. He thought at first that this was merely the effect of his excited imagination, but on lying down again he found that the pain had been occasioned by one of the inequalities in his couch, which he had before noticed.

Surely, he thought, that might be remedied. The large horsehair cushion or mattress, which formed the upper surface of the sofa, was loose; and, thrusting his hand underneath it, he found that the inequality arose from a number of round, hard objects, not unlike the large pebbles of his dream.

Drawing one of them out, he saw at once that it was a jewel-case!

His amazement was unbounded. With trembling fingers he opened it—a magnificent diamond brooch lay before him!

It was with difficulty that he could repress a cry of astonishment. For a few seconds he gazed at it, his heart beating fast with excitement; and then he plunged his hand a second time beneath the sofa cushion. A curiously-shaped box was the first he fingered. He brought it out. It proved to be the case of a superb necklace of pearls. Without closing it he made another plunge into this extraordinary treasure-house, and his fingers had just closed upon another box, when——

"Tap—tap—tap!"

It was Mrs. Sparke, the landlady, come with his supper-tray.

Hastily catching up a newspaper, Gribble flung it over the open jewel-cases, and shouted: "Come in!"

Fortunately there was room enough on the table for the tray without disturbing the newspaper, which Mr. Gribble affected to be diligently reading. All the time the woman was in the room the young man was in a state of the most excruciating anxiety. He hardly dared trust himself to speak; and when he did answer a question his voice sounded so odd that it startled him to think what it must sound like to another. However, at last the good woman received her orders and went off. No sooner was she fairly out of the way, than Mr. Gribble locked his door, and set about his task in earnest.

He removed all the jewel-cases he could find under the sofa-cushion, opened them, and ranged them in order on the table.

Never was such a sight seen before in Pentonville.

The display was magnificent. There were rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and turquoises, as well as diamonds and pearls; and they set in every conceivable form of ornament—brooches, necklaces, and pendants—rings, earrings, and bracelets, with several trinkets of which the young man did not even know the name. He stood like one fascinated, unable to think clearly, his eyes dazzled by the sight of the gems, and his imagination bewildered by the thought of the wealth which they represented. It was not until he had compelled himself to close the cases and put them away in a black bag, which he daily carried to and from the city, that he recovered his mental balance. He then ate some bread and cheese, and, having finished his supper, he sat down to consider the matter.

Here certainly was a mystery. By what strange train of circumstances did these jewels come to be under the sofa cushion? To whom did they belong? Why had they been hidden there? What was he to do with them? Was it his duty to hand them over to Mrs. Sparke? Or to the police? Or set himself the task of discovering the true owner of the gems?

With regard to the first point, Mr. Gribble considered that the jewel-cases had probably lain under the sofa cushion for some time—it might be for years—and there was but one way, it seemed to him, of accounting for their presence where he had found them. They had been placed there hurriedly, and the owner, or the person in whose possession they had last been, had been prevented from returning to claim his property. He might have been killed by accident, or by design, or (more likely) he had been arrested, and the police had not succeeded in learning the place of his abode. This would explain the whole matter, and the young man came to the conclusion that this explanation must be

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the true one, for there could be no doubt that the treasure had been dishonestly come by. It was absurd to suppose that the true owner had secreted the jewels in such a place.

And Mr. Gribble told himself that a great deal turned upon that fact, for one cannot steal from a thief. The jewels seemed, in fact, to be of the nature of treasure-trove belonging by the law of Nature, if not by the law of human framing, to the first finder. On further consideration Mr. Gribble found no sufficient reason for surrendering his claim to anyone. It was tolerably certain that if he were to make his discovery public, many claimants would step forward—for it seemed most unlikely that so large and varied an assortment of jewels should belong to one person—and what security had he that the successful claimants would have any better right to the jewellery than he himself had? It was possible, certainly, that the treasure was the result of the robbery of a jeweller's shop; but Gribble was certain that there had been no robbery of such magnitude for a very long time.

With such arguments as those Mr. Gribble succeeded in stifling the voice of his conscience. He finally determined to look upon the jewels as his own, precisely as if he had found them on a desert island, and a thrill ran through his veins as he realised what this might mean to him. Wealth beyond what he had ever dreamt of possessing was already in his grasp. But there were certain dangers and difficulties to be met and overcome.

He must remember that although this treasure seemed to be derelict, it might not be so in reality, and that his appropriation of it might be attended with distinct peril. But this consideration, instead of weakening, only strengthened his resolution. He would match his wits against those of the clumsy London detectives, and beat them. He would dispose of the jewels secretly, one by one, in such a way as to baffle the keenest scent. In less than twelve months he would be a wealthy man, beyond the reach even of suspicion.

Having settled the main point, Mr. Gribble considered what his next steps ought to be, and then went to bed, taking care to carry the jewels into his bedroom, and to lock the door carefully before he lay down.

Next morning he put the bulk of the cases into his black bag, and the rest into his pockets. It was evident that he must return to these rooms no more, and this involved the loss of his trunk. That, however, Mr. Gribble told himself, was a small matter. His personal belongings would be enough to pay the small sum he owed to Mrs. Sparke—compared with the wealth he was now carrying about him it was not to be mentioned for a moment. One or two indispensable articles of clothing he disposed about his person, and went off to the City, looking as if he had gone marketing and had elected to carry his purchases home in his pockets.

Having reached the office without being challenged by the police, as he half expected to be, Gribble put his bag and overcoat away in a corner where they would not be noticed, and applied himself to his work with such an amount of attention as he could command. His plan was to go on quietly with his work at the office, seek out new rooms, and live in them in such a way as to occasion no remark for some time. Then, when his former landlady would have forgotten him and his abrupt desertion of her, he would begin the task of turning the jewels into cash.

He found suitable lodgings that night with no great difficulty, and the first thing he did after he settled down was to strip the stones of their settings, and secure them in a stout leather belt which, after a good deal of trouble, he succeeded in fabricating. This he wore round his waist; and if it caused him some inconvenience he consoled himself with the thought that he carried about with him continually that which placed him above the wants, the cares, and the anxieties of mankind.

As for the discarded cases, the disposing of them gave Mr. Gribble some anxious thought. One or two of them he threw away on waste pieces of land in the neighbourhood, but remembering that he could not throw away the eighteen remaining cases in this manner without running some risk, and that, at any rate, the plan was one which would never have commended itself to Lecoq, or any of his contemporaries, he made up the remaining cases with the gold settings in a parcel, which he weighted with a couple of bricks carried home in his black bag, and sank the bundle in the Thames by throwing it over one of the less frequented bridges at midnight. That done, he felt tolerably safe.

The shock was, therefore, all the greater, when, on being summoned one day to Mr. Spilliter's room, he found there, not the well-known figure of his employer, but a tall, hard-featured, military-looking man, dressed in a frock-coat buttoned up to the chin, and a young man about his own age, in a suit of tweeds of a telling pattern, on whose ingenuous countenance there rested a certain look of anxiety.

Gribble looked from one to the other, and said nothing. He knew he had grown very white, but that he could not help. He determined not to surrender the treasure if he could possibly avoid it. There was one point in his favour. Mr. Spilliter seemed to be out. It might be that if he succeeded in outwitting the detective his employer might never hear that the accusation had been made.

"I came to inquire," said the hard-featured man, "whether you lately stayed for one night—one night only—at the house of a Mrs. Sparke, 39, Caroline Street, Pentonville."

"What's that to you?" retorted Mr. Gribble. He was pleased with his own display of spirit; but the tall, hard-featured man only smiled.

"Come now," he said, "I see you're our man. And there are only the two ways of it—either you tell us all you know, and 'elp us all you can, or we'll have to make a criminal business of it, and then it won't be askin' questions of ye, but somethin' a vast deal worse to put up with. So take your choice, my young friend. But if you will be guided by me you will own up at once. What have ye done with 'em? Eh?"

Mr. Gribble gasped a little, for somehow he seemed to be choking, and moistened his lips. It was all so dreadfully prosaic, but at the same time so horribly real! What was he to do? The mirage of wealth which had haunted him ever since he had made his grand discovery faded from before his eyes. Concealment was no longer possible. He must give up the jewels and make the best terms he could.

"Do you represent the owners of this—this alleged property?" he asked, turning to the young man in tweeds, who had not yet spoken.

"I certainly do," said the young man firmly; "and what I say is, I can't see the need of all this palaver. Why can't you deliver up the goods at once, and be hanged to you? You ought to be prosecuted, and you may think yourself deuced lucky if we take the stuff and say no more about it."

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Something in the young man's manner awakened Gribble's suspicions.

"You will have to prove your right to—to the property," he said.

"Oh, of course. Are you going to give up the things, or are you not?"

"I am," said Mr. Gribble, with dignity, "and all I stipulate for is that my claim to a reward—salvage, I may call it—should be fairly and dispassionately considered."

He left the room without noticing the stare with which this speech was received; and in a few minutes he returned, carrying in his hand the leather belt which he had made to keep the jewels in.

"There, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, laying the belt on the table with a smile of conscious rectitude, "I believe you will find the stones there without one exception."

So saying he raised one end of the belt and rained a shower of sparkling gems upon Mr. Spilliter's office table.

"What d'ye mean by that, you young rascal?" cried the hard-featured man, while the gentleman in tweeds sprang forward, and grasped the invoice-clerk by the collar.

"What's all this?" he shouted.

"The stones!" cried Gribble, twisting himself free—"the stones, you ungrateful hound!"

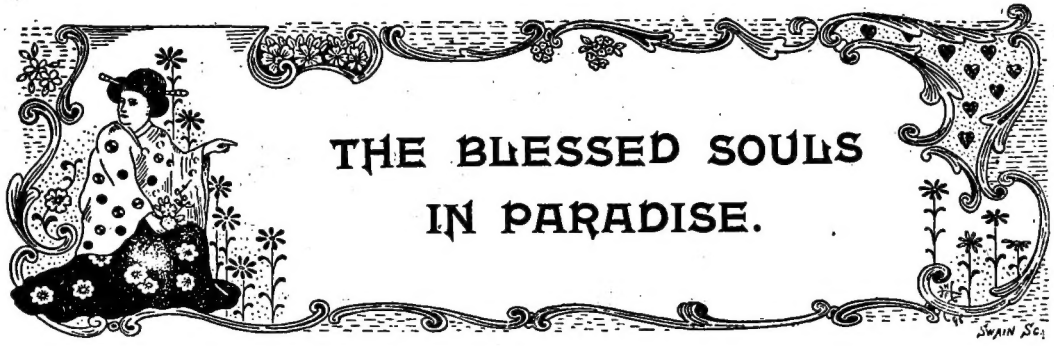
"To the mischief with your stones!" screamed the other, with one movement of his arm sweeping the glittering heap on to the floor—"I don't care a hang for the stones. They ain't stones—they're glass. What have you done with the gold settings—none of it less than nine-carat gold, and some of it as much as fifteen! What have you done with the gold settings and the cases, worth half-a-crown apiece at the very least—what have you done with *them?*"

"Those," said Mr. Gribble with quiet contempt, "are beyond your reach. You will have to seek them at the bottom of the Thames!"

"Shall I? By George, though, I'll make you pay for them!"

It was some time before the bewildered Mr. Gribble could be made to understand the facts of the case. When at length he understood that the priceless gems which he had appropriated were neither more nor less than specimens of sham jewellery made by a Birmingham firm for which Mrs. Sparke's eldest son acted as travelling salesman, he began to think that he had been greatly to blame in meddling with the matter at all.

And when he further learnt that young Mr. Sparke insisted that he should make up the value of the cases and the nine-carat gold settings by monthly payments, under the penalty of being denounced and prosecuted, his disgust was too deep for words. It took Mr. Gribble eighteen months to work off the debt, but it was a much longer time before his experience—the only one he ever had—of treasure-trove faded from his memory.



ONCE upon a time there was an old woman who had a niece, whom she had brought up very strictly, and who was a good, pious girl, but very timid and retiring. The old woman worried a good deal as to what should become of her niece when she herself was gone, and prayed God to send her a good husband. She made inquiries of a friend of hers who kept a boarding-house, and found that among her guests was a rich West Indian, who had announced that he would marry as soon as he could find a good, industrious, and clever girl.

The old woman sent him word that her niece was just what he wanted, that she was a prize, a grain of gold, and so clever that she could paint the birds in the air. The gentleman answered that he should be happy to make her acquaintance, and that he would come to see her next day. The old woman ran home, for she lived in a back street, and told her niece to put the house in order and to dress herself in her best the next day, for she was going to have a visitor. When the gentleman came the next morning he asked the girl if she knew how to spin.

"Why shouldn't she know how to spin?" answered the aunt. "She can spin a skein of thread while you are drinking a glass of water."

"What have you done, señora?" cried the niece after the gentleman had gone. "You *know* I cannot spin."

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"Go ahead and try!" said the aunt, "and see what Providence will do for you."

"Ah, what a scrape you have got me into!" said the girl, weeping.

"Just wait," said the aunt, "we'll see how you'll get along; but you must spin these hanks, for the future depends on it."

The girl went to her room that night in great distress and began to pray to all the blessed souls in Paradise, for she was very pious.

While she was still on her knees, three beautiful spirits, dressed all in white, appeared to her and told her not to distress herself, for they would help her in return for the benefit which they had derived from her prayers, and each took a hank and, in a twinkling of an eye, spun it into thread as fine as a hair.

The next day, when the West Indian came, he was astonished at her skill and industry.

"Didn't I tell you, your Honour," said the old woman, full of delight.

The gentleman then asked the girl if she knew how to sew.

"Sew?" said the aunt. "Of course she knows how to sew. She'll finish a piece of sewing in the time it would take you to swallow a cherry at a bite."

Then the gentleman went away, leaving enough linen for three shirts, and the same thing happened as before, and again the next day, when he brought a satin waistcoat for her to embroider; only that night when the girl, with many tears, made a fervent appeal to the three blessed souls in Paradise, they appeared to her, and one of them said: "Do not worry, we will embroider this waistcoat for you, but on one condition."

"What is it?" asked the girl anxiously.

"You must invite us to your wedding."

"Am I going to be married?" asked the girl.

"Yes," answered the spirits, "to the rich West Indian."

And so it turned out, for when the gentleman saw the waistcoat so neatly embroidered that it looked as if hands could never have touched it, and fine enough to put your eye out, he told the aunt that he would like to marry her niece.

The aunt jumped for joy; not so the niece, who said to her:

"But, señora, what will become of me when my husband finds out that I don't know how to do anything?"

"Never mind, never mind!" said the aunt. "The blessed souls who have helped you so far will get you out of the difficulty."

So the wedding-day was fixed, and the night before the bride invited the blessed souls, according to agreement.

On the wedding-day, at the height of the festivities, three old women entered the hall, so bitterly ugly that everybody stared in amazement, and the bridegroom was dumfoundered. The first to enter had one very short arm and the other so long that it dragged on the ground. The second was hump-backed, and held her body all awry. The third had eyes more prominent than those of a conger eel, and redder than a tomato.

"Santa Maria!" said the groom to the bride. "Who are those three frights?"

"They are three aunts of my father's, whom I invited to my wedding," said the bride.

The señor, who believed her, went and spoke to them and offered them seats.

"Pray tell me," said he to the first old woman, "why have you a short arm and a long arm?"

"My son," answered the old woman, "it is because I have done so much spinning."

The bridegroom rose and went to his bride and said:

"Go at once and burn your wheel and your spindle, and never let me see you spin."

Then he asked the second old woman why she was hump-backed and all awry.

"My son," answered she, "because I have sat so much at the embroidery frame."

The gentleman went to his wife and said:

"Hurry up and burn your embroidery frame, and never let me see you embroider as long as you live."

Then he turned to the third old woman, and asked her why her eyes were so bulging and so red.

"My son," answered she, rolling them about in her head, "it is because I have sewed so much and bent my head over my work."

She had no sooner spoken these words than the bridegroom hastened to his wife's side and said:

"Collect your needles and thread and throw them down the well, and remember that the day I see you sew I will get a divorce." FERNAN CABELLERO.

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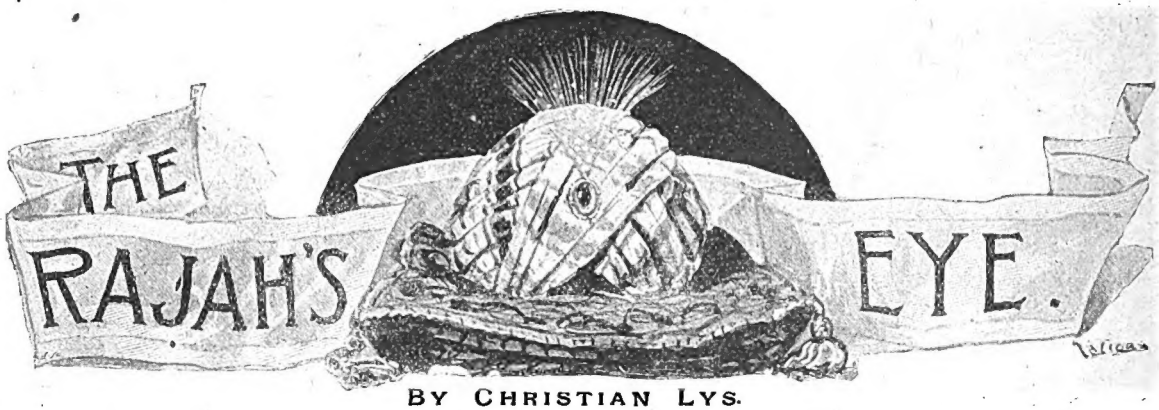

By Christian Lys.

Author of "The Doctor's Idol," "Suspicions," etc.

I.

Mr. Christopher sat in front of his office fire nursing his left knee, his right leg stretched out to the fender, and in the corner of his mouth was an expensive cigar.

"Thirty thousand pounds," he murmured softly, almost caressingly. "Thirty thousand pounds! It is a great temptation, and, by Jove! it's business. Why should I give the fellow up to justice? If I wanted to, I could not prove that what I stated was true. After all, he is more sinned against than sinning, and besides, he has trusted me. It would be inhuman to put the law upon him."

Mr. Christopher took a paper from his pocket, a newspaper that had come from abroad, for part of the stamp adhered to it still.

"There's no mistake about it. Here it is in black and white. Five lakhs of rupees, thirty thousand pounds, to be made for twenty-five hundred down. If I don't do it, somebody else will. Of course I must do it."

Mr. Christopher blew a cloud of tobacco smoke into the face of the clock on the mantelpiece. A large number of letters were lying upon his table waiting to be attended to, but he could not give them his attention just now.

Presently there was a sharp tap at his door.

"Come in. What is it, Mr. Thomas?"

"A Mr. Smith to see you, sir. He says that his business is of a private nature."

"Show him in," said Mr. Christopher, and then he added to himself: "Private nature! I should think so."

There entered with great deference, as conscious of coming into the presence of such a considerable personage as the head of the largest firm of India merchants in the City of London, a tall, lank, hungry-looking individual. He had a wisp of grey hair under his chin, and his scanty eyebrows, which were permanently elevated, gave his keen, deep-set eyes a constant look of astonishment. His clothes, although scrupulously tidy, had seen better days; and his hands—long, thin hands they were—were clean and well cared for.

"Sit down, Mr. Smith, sit down. Let us come to business at once. I am a man of very few words."

Mr. Smith sat down on the extreme edge of an arm-chair, and placed his hat on the carpet beside him.

"You have decided then, Mr. Christopher?" he said slowly, with a drawl.

"I have."

"To buy?"

"To buy."

Mr. Smith took his handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed first one eye and then the other.

"That is very good of you, Mr. Christopher," he said; "very good. I have put myself entirely in your hands, sir. I am not going back upon my word. I stole the jewel, I——"

"Sh! sh! I don't want to know that," interrupted Mr. Christopher.

"Of course not, but my position is a peculiar one. In justification to myself, I must tell you, Mr. Christopher, I am no ordinary thief. As you know, I was well known and respected abroad, and it was not until the blackguards robbed me of the means of getting my living that I sank low enough to be revenged by robbery."

"To business, Mr. Smith," said Mr. Christopher. "You told me all about that last night."

"Well, I—got possession of the stone, and I want to sell it. You can quite understand, Mr. Christopher, that so valuable a jewel in my possession looks suspicious"—he glanced down at his shabby garments as he spoke—"while in yours——"

"Just so," said Mr. Christopher.

"I am told the stone is worth twenty thousand pounds."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Christopher. "Let me look at it again."

The long man stood up, and from an inner pocket took a small box. He opened it carefully, and displayed to Mr. Christopher an enormous pigeon-blood ruby.

"It is supposed to be the only stone of the size and perfect colour in the world," said Mr. Smith.

In truth it was a wonderful gem, and Mr. Christopher's eyes sparkled as he looked at it.

"You are willing to hand this stone to me for two thousand five hundred pounds!"

"Yes," replied Mr. Smith slowly. "It is a sacrifice, but, under the circumstances, I cannot help it. I will not disguise from you the fact, Mr. Christopher, that you may find it difficult to dispose of."

"I will take my chance," was the answer.

"Of course it will be easier for you to do so than it would be for me. I should hardly sell at such a sacrifice otherwise."

Mr. Christopher smiled. Evidently Mr. Smith did not know that a reward had been offered for the jewel.

"There is one condition I make," said Mr. Smith.

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"Well, what is it?"

"That you undertake not to deal with the stone, and not to speak of it to anybody for a month from this date. I have to think of myself, Mr. Christopher, and I want to entirely obliterate myself, so to speak, before anything is known about it. I was too well known in India to be careless even in England, and should you have occasion to give a description of the individual you got the stone from you might forget that he is tall and thin. My appearance is a somewhat marked one."

"This is purely a business transaction, Mr. Smith, as far as I am concerned," said Mr. Christopher. "It comes into my hands in the course of business, and I have no wish to remember how you became possessed of the stone, or, indeed, from whom I obtained it."

"I cannot part with it except under the condition I have mentioned," said Mr. Smith decidedly.

"I accept the condition, and undertake to forget you, my friend."

"You will not write, or telegraph, or talk about it. I do not intend to jeopardise my safety."

"I will not. I give you my word."

"Then give me your money," and a long, thin hand was extended.

Mr. Christopher opened his cheque book, and in exchange for the jewel gave Mr. Smith a cheque for two thousand five hundred pounds. Mr. Smith placed the box upon the desk, and, folding up the cheque, put it carefully in his pocket.

"Good-day, Mr. Christopher, and thank you."

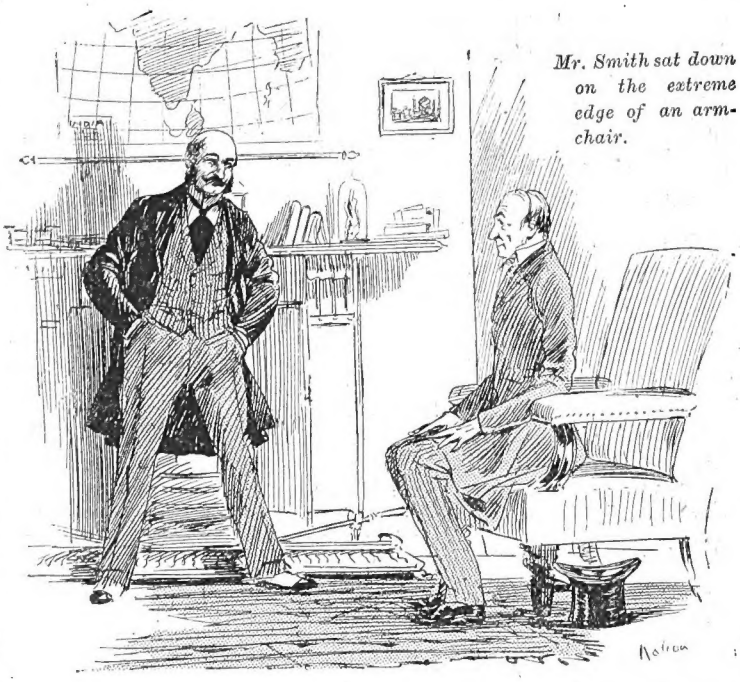
"Good-day, Mr. Smith. Kindly remember that in future we are absolute strangers."

"I shall not forget."

And, still deferential, Mr. Smith bowed himself out.

Mr. Christopher was a man of his word. He had promised Mr. Smith to make no use of the jewel for a month, and he would as soon have thought of flying as breaking this promise. He locked the jewel in a drawer in his safe, but hardly a day passed that he did not take it from its hiding-place and feast his eyes upon it. A man who gives two thousand five hundred pounds for an article, no matter what its actual value may be, naturally looks upon his purchase as a treasure.

As a matter of fact, however, Mr. Christopher knew the value of the ruby—at least its sentimental value; would have known that it was worth a vast sum, even had he not seen the reward offered for it in the Indian paper. Perhaps Mr. Smith had overrated its intrinsic value when he mentioned twenty thousand pounds, but, at the same time, he was a man who ought to know.



Mr. Smith sat down on the extreme edge of an arm-chair.

Mr. Christopher had not been in India for some years now, but in the past he had been there a great deal, and few men knew the country better than he did, at any rate from a commercial point of view.

He was a practical man, had made a point of knowing personally the various countries his firm had business with, so that he was an exceedingly well-travelled man, a man of wide experience, and had an enormous amount of general and out-of-the-way knowledge in his head.

A few years ago his peregrinations had taken him into the State of Bhugerpore in Central India, and during his sojourn there he had laid the foundation of a very extensive trade for his firm, of which he was now the sole representative, and this trade had steadily increased ever since. The laying of this foundation had brought him in contact with many influential native merchants, and on more than one occasion with the Rajah of Bhugerpore himself, a potentate of considerable enlightenment, and as avaricious as he was enormously wealthy. The fame of his wealth was not confined to the State he ruled over, but had spread throughout India, and among his treasures nothing was more renowned than the great ruby the Rajah wore in his state turban, and which was known as "The Rajah's Eye."

Although the Rajah was enlightened, he had, in common with all Orientals, many superstitions, and was at one with his subjects in attaching great significance to this jewel. It was not only the emblem of sovereignty, but the pledge of the gods' protection; for ever since Bhugerpore was a State—and according to those who were supposed to know, its beginning must have been contemporaneous with the flood—it had adorned the head-dress of the ruler, and was commonly believed to shine more or less brilliantly as its wearer governed his people well or ill.

This jewel was at the present moment in Mr. Christopher's possession. It had been mysteriously removed from the turban, and the enormous reward of five lakhs of rupees had been offered for its recovery. Mr. Smith admitted that he had stolen it in revenge, and Mr. Christopher could quite understand that it had been a comparatively easy theft, since Mr. Smith had held an important position in the Rajah's palace. Mr. Smith's story of ill usuage might be a fabrication to condone the offence to some extent, but of the theft there was no doubt. Mr. Christopher had recognised the stone the moment he saw it. He had admired it many

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a time in Bhugerpore when the Rajah had passed on state occasions, and he had more than once stood close to the wearer of it, and talked with him, while the jewel sparkled at every movement of his head. It was indeed impossible to forget the stone, having once seen it. There was not its equal in the two hemispheres.

Mr. Christopher had a conscience, and it pricked him to some extent. There was no getting over the fact that he was the receiver of stolen property; still, property stolen from an Indian Rajah was hardly the same thing as property stolen from a fellow-countryman, who might possibly rub sleeves with you every day in the street.

"It makes all the difference," Mr. Christopher argued to himself; but whether he was convinced by his own argument or not, is a moot point. At any rate, he did not tell anybody, not even his wife, that "The Rajah's Eye" was in his keeping, or that in the near future he would receive about thirty thousand pounds for restoring it to the rightful owner.

During the month of silence which Mr. Smith had bargained for, Mr. Christopher was very hard at work early and late at his office. He had many things to arrange before going to India, for, of course, he was obliged to go to Bhugerpore himself. He could trust nobody with so delicate and important a mission.

Without uttering a falsehood, he was able to tell his wife that he was going abroad on business. It was business—business worth somewhere about twenty-seven thousand pounds after allowing for the money he had paid, the expense of the journey, and the loss by exchange.

Of course his clerks were curious, knowing of no transactions with Bhugerpore that made it necessary for the "Governor" to go there. Mr. Thomas, who had as much of Mr. Christopher's confidence as that gentleman ever gave to anyone, gave it as his opinion that the journey had something to do with that "long, lean Johnnie," as he was pleased to call Mr. Smith.

"The 'Governor' hasn't been himself since he came."

"More than that, I believe he gave the man a lot of money," said another.

"It wasn't business, then," said the cashier, "for no cheque has been drawn on the firm, except those I know all about."

Mr. Thomas had some reason for connecting his employer's journey with Mr. Smith's visit. He had twice chanced to go into the private room at the moment Mr. Christopher was locking the jewel away after inspecting it, and on both occasions Mr. Christopher had expressed annoyance at the interruption, and seemed rather confused. The clerk was surprised at such unusual behaviour, and not a little curious.

The stipulated month over, Mr. Christopher was ready to start. He did not intend to be away longer than he could help, so with as little luggage as possible, and with the jewel, which he had put in a small leather case, carefully concealed about his person, he joined the steamer at Suez.

He had been on deck about half-an-hour, when he was startled by a cheery voice behind him exclaiming:

"Hallo, Christopher! What in the name of all that's wonderful brings you in this part of the world?"

"Business," he answered, turning to shake hands with a fat, round individual, who looked the picture of self-complacency. Mr. Christopher was not pleased to see Mr. Fenwick of the firm of Fenwick, Gibbs and Co. It may have been professional prejudice, but he had always looked upon Mr. Fenwick as a man quite capable of underhand dealing.

"Business, eh! I thought you didn't go abroad much now?"

"I do not, but this time my business is too important to intrust to another person."

"Same here, exactly. I'm off to Bhugerpore as fast as this ship will carry me."

"Bhugerpore!"

"Yes—oh, your firm doesn't monopolise the trade there."

Mr. Christopher did not answer. He did not believe that Fenwick, Gibbs and Co. had much trade with Bhugerpore, in fact, was perfectly certain they had not. Why was Mr. Fenwick going there? And then he grew suspicious, especially as he could feel that his companion was watching him. Could Mr. Fenwick know anything about the theft of "The Rajah's Eye?" Could he have come out with the idea of blackmailing him, and sharing the reward? Could he in short know anything about the jewel at all? No. Perfectly absurd.

And yet—— Like a flash, the remembrance came to him of the two occasions his clerk Thomas had entered the room just at the moment he was replacing the stone in the safe. Had Thomas caught sight of it by any chance, and sold the information to the rival firm?

"I am going to Bhugerpore too," said Mr. Christopher quietly.

Mr. Fenwick said he was very pleased, but somehow he did not look it.

II.

Very suspicious of his fellow traveller, confident that he was bent upon some underhand deal, Mr. Christopher was extremely careful of the jewel, and exceedingly cautious in his conversation. After watching Mr. Fenwick closely for two or three days, he came to the conclusion that Mr. Fenwick certainly knew of the stone, and that his intention was to get possession of it. No doubt the reward was a great temptation to such a man, and he would not be likely to stick at trifles. But how did he expect to get it? By robbery. It was the only way, for he was not likely to circumvent Mr. Christopher by any sharp practice he might attempt. Mr. Christopher was much too old a bird to be caught by the proverbial pinch of salt. His 'cuteness was well known, and it would require an abnormally early riser to find him asleep.

Mr. Christopher smiled as his hand pressed the small case which was sewn into his waistcoat. He wore that waistcoat always, even wore it under his pyjamas at night. Seeing how impossible it was for Mr. Fenwick to rob him, Mr. Christopher took an absolute delight in tempting him to try. He purposely left his cabin door open. He left his portmanteau unfastened and his things lying about; and, whenever he missed Mr. Fenwick for any length of time, crept down in the hope of catching him in the act.

However, Mr. Fenwick showed no disposition to rifle Mr. Christopher's luggage. He contented himself with watching Mr. Christopher as closely as that gentleman watched him. In the limited space of a mail steamer it was impossible to get far away from each other. Perforce they met at meals three times a day, and encountered each other whenever they promenaded the deck. The studied politeness with which they endeavoured to conceal their dislike for each other was a source of endless amusement to the other passengers.

On landing, circumstances obliged them to be closer

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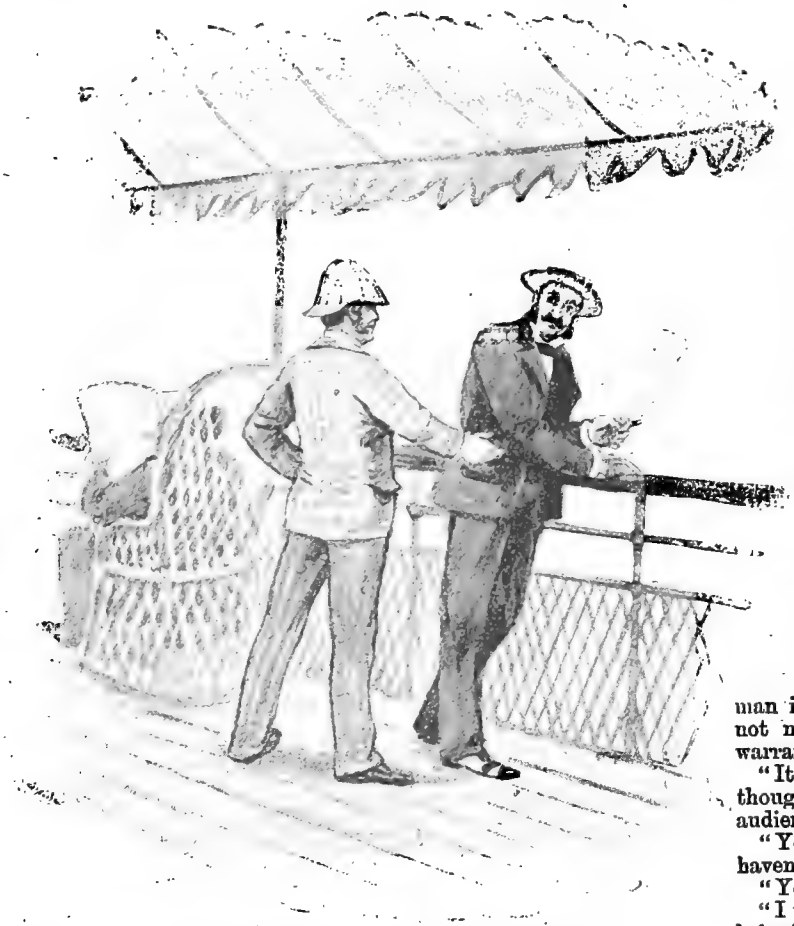

He was startled by a cheery voice behind him.

companions still, as they made the journey from the coast into the interior to Bhugerpore together.

"Are you staying long?" Mr. Fenwick asked, as they neared the journey's end.

"A few days—and you?"

"Precisely my case," said Mr. Fenwick, and then he added casually, "I trust your enterprise will be successful."

Mr. Christopher smiled. It was too transparent an effort to draw him.

"I never take a step unless I am quite certain of my ground," he said.

"'Twixt cup and lip, there's many a slip," quoted his companion. "I can truthfully say my business causes me some anxiety."

"I have noticed that you have been somewhat excited ever since we left Suez."

"Merely my temperament," returned Mr. Fenwick quickly.

"Ah! I never get excited," said Mr. Christopher, with a superiority which was overwhelming. "A cool head is the only one for business. I built my firm on a cool head."

"Fenwick, Gibbs and Co. was founded by me, sir, has increased every year under my management, and I do not boast of a cool head. I fancy that knocks the bottom out of your argument."

Mr. Fenwick was much annoyed and did not refer to business again.

In Bhugerpore they separated.

"We may meet on our return journey," said Mr. Christopher, shaking hands.

"We may," was the curt answer, implying that it was most improbable.

Mr. Christopher accepted the hospitality of one of the richest merchants in Bhugerpore, and as he regarded the sumptuous luxury around him, he pitied poor Mr. Fenwick. Of course, the people he knew in Bhugerpore must be of a secondhand character. The merchants Mr. Christopher did not know were hardly worth knowing.

"You have come upon some great business, I presume, Mr. Christopher?" said his host.

"I have."

"May I know it?"

"First I must have an audience with the Rajah. My business affects him, in fact it has to do with everyone in Bhugerpore."

He spoke grandiloquently, and the merchant was duly impressed. His business relations with the Englishman in the past convinced him that he would not make such a statement without due warranty.

"It must be a very great business," he said thoughtfully; and he promised to secure an audience as soon as possible.

"You have had bad times in Bhugerpore, haven't you?" queried Mr. Christopher.

"Yes, rather bad, but I have known worse."

"I trust my coming will have the effect of bringing better times."

That night, Mr. Christopher took the jewel from his waistcoat to examine it and make sure it was secure. He experienced a little pang of fear every time he opened the case, fear that something might have happened to his treasure. It was perfectly safe, scintillating brilliantly.

Two days afterwards, the Rajah gave audience. The merchant told his guest that the potentate had been much out of temper lately, and hoped the business would tend to pacify him.

"It will," said Mr. Christopher confidently. He could quite understand the Rajah's anger.

It was a day of audience, and there was considerable excitement about the palace.

Cool man as he was, Mr. Christopher was guilty of a feeling of excitement when he thought of the change his mission would cause. He forgot all about the reward for the time being, in speculation of the general rejoicing that would follow his interview. If in England he attained no lasting honours, in Bhugerpore his name would certainly be handed down to posterity; some title even might be conferred upon him which he could use with advantage in the city and in Society at home.

He entered the palace, accompanied by two or three merchants, his friends, and, if there was excitement without, it was nothing to the excitement within. The audience had commenced, and in the outer court there was a regular Babel. The first person he set eyes upon

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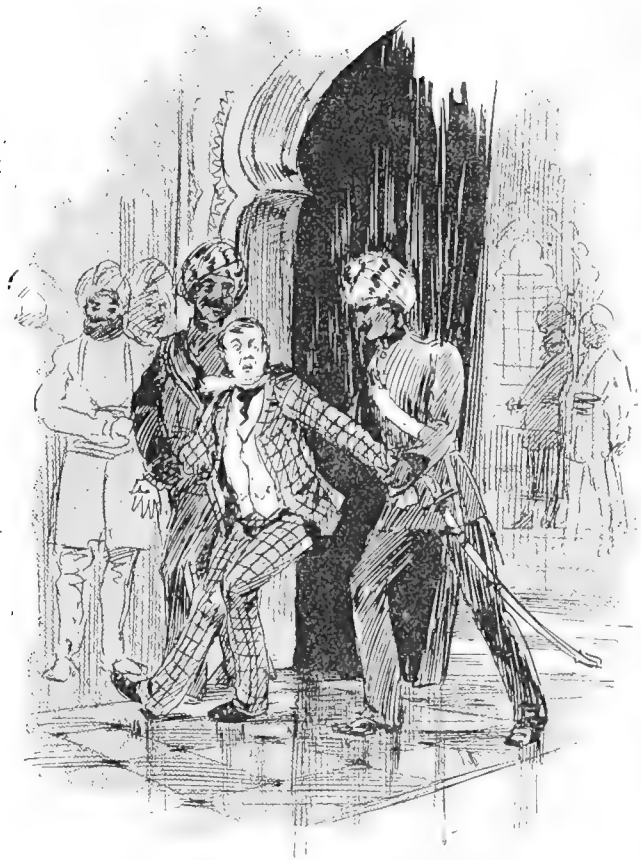

"For Heaven's sake, Chris'opher, speak for me!"

was Mr. Fenwick, held tightly by soldiers, abject terror depicted in his face.

"For Heaven's sake, Christopher, speak for me!" and then the soldiers hurried him away, and would allow him to say no more.

Mr. Christopher was bewildered. Hardly understanding what he heard, he learnt that Mr. Fenwick's crime was the offering of a valueless stone as the great jewel of Bhugerpore which had been lost.

"Fool!" he muttered, as his hand closed over the case he had protected so long and carefully. "Fool!"

The next moment he passed into the presence of the Rajah. The dusky monarch looked exceedingly fierce, a man not to be trifled with at any time, and just now enraged at Mr. Fenwick's attempted fraud.

The friendly merchants trembled for Mr. Christopher, should his business prove to be of less importance than he deemed it.

Mr. Christopher stood still and was silent. He grew pale and his limbs shook, but not with fear. He was an Englishman, and a Rajah, however angry, was not likely to strike terror into him. In fact, he hardly noticed the Rajah. His gaze was fixed upon the turban, for there in the centre of it, scintillating with liquid fire, shone a jewel—the jewel—"The Rajah's Eye!"

Mr. Christopher, his fingers still closed tightly round the case he had treasured so assiduously, looked at the coruscating gem with a fascination which was not entirely free from superstition. How had it got there? For two months or more it had been in his possession, was in his possession only this morning when he had last looked at it, and yet——

There was no time to speculate, for the Rajah was waiting for him to approach; and collecting himself with a great effort Mr. Christopher saluted, and suggested that their interview should be more private. The Rajah motioned those about him to stand back a little, and while they did so Mr. Christopher had a moment or two for reflection. Then he poured into the Rajah's ears a long rigmarole about an extention of business which he contemplated with the State of Bhugerpore. It was all a fairy-tale, and the fluency with which the cool-headed Englishman unfolded his imaginary scheme spoke volumes for his inventive genius. The monarch was an avaricious man and listened attentively. Mr. Christopher had already done much for the trade of the State, why should he not do even more for it in the future.

"I leave it to your consideration," said the Englishman. "I have, as yet, spoken of it to no man, not even to your most illustrious subjects, who have traded with me in the past. I deemed it wise to consult with you first."

This pleased the Rajah greatly.

"Now may I congratulate your Highness, and speak of another matter, which is partly the reason of my presence here," continued Mr. Christopher, glancing at the turban. "We in England"—he spoke pompously, as if the destiny of England were under his immediate control—"we in England have heard that the glorious jewel, the pride and glory of your Highness, the 'Eye' that watches over all people in this great State of Bhugerpore, had been stolen, and that a large reward had been offered for it. I rejoice to see that it again gleams and sparkles above your august brow, to speak to all of your mightiness, and the stupendous antiquity of your race, which since time was has given rulers to Bhugerpore."

The Rajah's face clouded, remembering Mr. Fenwick.

"It has become known to me," Mr. Christopher went on, "that the reward has proved a great temptation to unscrupulous men, who intended to proclaim that they had found the jewel, whereas they have only possessed themselves of a copy, hoping thereby to deceive your Majesty, and to plunder your State of five lahks of rupees."

Then the Rajah burst out with all his native savagery.

"I know it—behold! This bauble was but now brought to me as the great 'Eye' of my forefathers, this worthless stone as the jewel that has crowned the brow of every Rajah of Bhugerpore, since Bhugerpore was. Fools! could I be deceived with such a thing as this, even if the jewel had not been found?"

He held the bauble out to Mr. Christopher, who looked at it, and then at the real jewel set in the turban.

"I have already seen two such stones, your Highness," said Mr. Christopher, for in his pocket he had an exact duplicate of the sham jewel. He had been deceived, there was no doubt of it. Seeing the great pink ruby blazing before him, the stone he had treasured so carefully appeared only a very poor imitation.

"Two!" exclaimed the Rajah.

"Yes, two," said Mr. Christopher; no one was more grieved at the sad depravity of man than he was just then. "And this has brought me to Bhugerpore, to warn your Highness. It is not only those whose hearts are

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open, and whose deeds can bear the light of day, who possess a smooth tongue and courteous manner. If there are two copies of the jewel, there may be more."

"I shall know how to deal with all such as bring them to me," said the Rajah, a grim smile puckering his dusky countenance. "This was brought by a countryman of yours, a frightened, fat little man."

"I would speak of him, your Highness." Mr. Christopher disliked Mr. Fenwick, but he understood the sacred obligations of an Englishman. "May I first inquire how the jewel came to be stolen?"

"It was all a mistake. It never was stolen. One day it was missing from the turban, and proclamation was made throughout the State, and the news spread through the country. But no; it was only lost. It had only become loose and slipped from its place, and the next day was found in the folds of my dress."

"When did all this occur?"

"Five months ago, or more. I remember, because another countryman of yours, one who was in much honour here, displeased me at that time, and soon afterwards left me. I suspected him of stealing the jewel, but in that I injured him. I had forgotten all about it until now, when this little, fat man comes to me with his lying. Were he one of my own people he should lie no more, but as it is he shall not escape punishment."

"I would speak of him, your Highness," said Mr. Christopher slowly, thinking more rapidly than he spoke; "I would entreat for him. He did not cause this trashy imitation to be made; he has not the ability to be so crafty. He was deceived, and, in his foolishness, imagined that he was bringing you the real jewel."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the Rajah.

"In Bhugerpore such foolishness may be impossible, but in England, although we have many wise men, we have also many fools. This little fat man is one of them and I beseech your Highness not to punish him too severely. Let him pay for his folly, and then I will take him away."

"Pay!"

"Certainly," said Mr. Christopher, still thinking very rapidly. "Should he pay half a lakh of rupees, would you consent to forgive him?"

"I would think of it," said the Rajah, his eyes sparkling.

"It will be difficult," said Mr. Christopher. "My countryman may prefer to suffer punishment rather than pay money. He is not at all a liberal man, your Highness."

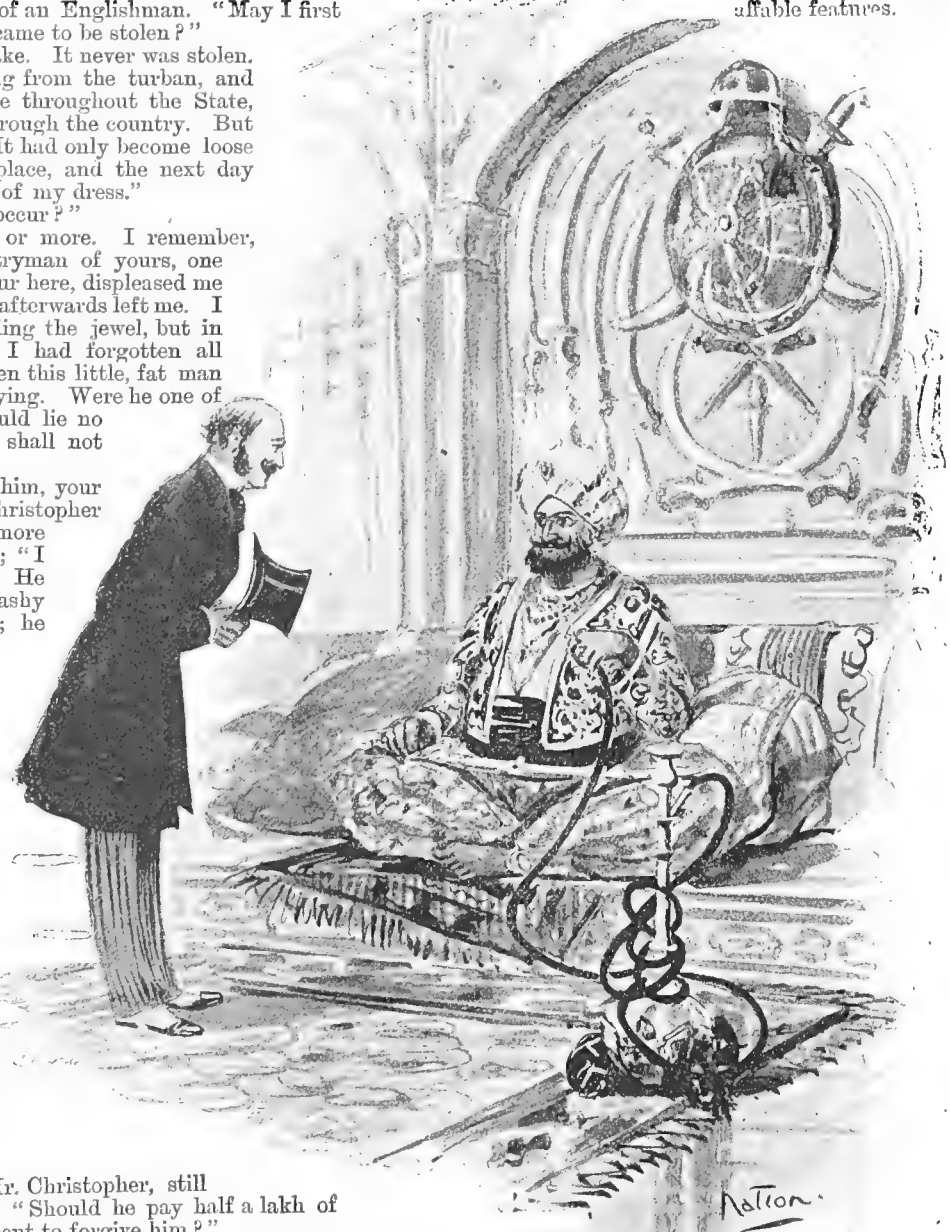
"He must pay!" exclaimed the Rajah.

"Supposing he prefers to suffer punishment?"

"Make him pay, Mr. Christopher. He is a frightened little man. Make him afraid of what I will do to him."

"And if I succeed?"

The Rajah looked at Mr. Christopher, and that gentleman met his gaze steadily, and without giving the slightest clue to his thoughts on his affable features.



"I would think of it," said the Rajah, his eyes sparkling.

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"What would you have?" asked the monarch, disappointed that such a question should have arisen.

"Twelve thousand rupees."

"Ah, no! It is too much."

"I shall have great difficulty to make my countryman pay at all."

The Rajah tried to beat Mr. Christopher down, but to no purpose, and at last he gave in. Mr. Christopher bowed low, and was then conducted to Mr. Fenwick. He assumed a grave aspect as he approached him, for he did not know how much of a coward Mr. Fenwick was.

"Well, Christopher, what has happened?"

"My dear Fenwick, you have terribly enraged the Rajah. Had I not come I cannot tell what might have happened. These Eastern potentates are vindictive, and although it is dangerous to take vengeance upon an Englishman, they sometimes forget the danger. The Rajah wants justice."

"Justice!"

"Sh! It is no time to argue. We are not in England, but in Bhugerpore, which I fear you know very imperfectly, Fenwick, or you would not have placed yourself in such a perilous position. The Rajah has spoken of death."

"The Rajah has spoken of death."

Mr. Fenwick's jaw fell, and his lips grew ashen. Mr. Christopher saw that the man was a coward.

"Death! Good heavens! what shall I do? Save me, Christopher. You know much more of this blackguardly country than I do."

"Fortunately, yes. Avarice is rampart in Bhugerpore. I have talked long and seriously with the Rajah, and only through his avarice can you hope to escape."

"He wants money!" Mr. Fenwick's pale face brightened.

"He does."

"How much?"

Mr. Christopher looked at him, almost a look of pity, and then said very deliberately:

"A lakh of rupees."

"A lakh! Did you say a lakh?"

Mr. Christopher nodded.

"A lakh! Why, that's six thousand pounds at least!"

"I am sorry, but they are terribly avaricious in Bhugerpore."

"Six thousand pounds!" repeated poor Mr. Fenwick. "I wouldn't give that sum for the life of any man in the world."

"It is your own life you have to consider just now. It is a long price to give for it, I know, but I suppose it is worth it to you. What answer am I to return to his Highness? If you pay the money, I have promised to get you out of the country as speedily as possible. To be quite plain, Fenwick, it is advisable that the Rajah should not see you again. He is so enraged that even his avarice might not save you."

"A lakh of rupees! How is it going to be done!"

The unfortunate man spread out his arms in despair, his face the picture of uncomfortable dismay.

"Come! Put a good face on your bad luck. It might be worse. Be thankful that the rate of exchange is as low as it is. Think of what a lakh of rupees would mean if the exchange were higher, and comfort yourself. You must arrange this payment somehow through me with a merchant here, for in a way I have become responsible for you. Should the amount be too great a draw upon the firm of Fenwick, Gibbs and Co., no doubt the firm of Christopher can manage a loan when we get back to London."

"I beg your pardon. Six thousand pounds will not break Fenwick, Gibbs and Co."

"I am glad to hear it. Where is the difficulty then?"

"Oh, pay the blackguard!" exclaimed Mr. Fenwick with an oath. "I shall make a Government matter of it when I get home. I'll have justice somehow."

With the utmost expedition the matter was arranged, the Rajah being delighted with his half a lakh of rupees, although he did make another vain attempt to get Mr. Christopher to lessen the amount of the commission, and that gentleman was equally pleased with the other half lakh, plus his twelve thousand rupees commission. It repaid him the money he had given to that scoundrel, Smith, and gave him a very handsome interest besides. Poor Mr. Fenwick! If he

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could only have known the meaning of Mr. Christopher's smile of pity!

Not until the shores of India had sunk below the horizon, did the unfortunate man breathe freely.

"Six thousand pounds is an awful price to pay for freedom," he said, as he stood watching the screw churn the blue ocean into foam.

"How did that trashy imitation come into your possession?" asked Mr. Christopher.

"This way. Of course, you have heard of a man named Smith, who had a rather important position in Bhugerpore."

"Yes."

"Well, he came to me with a tale of the many injuries he had suffered at the hands of the Rajah, that he had been nearly ruined, and in revenge had stolen 'The Rajah's Eye.' He showed me the jewel, and I recognised it at once, and knowing that the jewel had been stolen, and that a reward of five lakhs of rupees had been offered, I bought the stone for two thousand five hundred pounds. It was business. If I hadn't done so somebody else would."

"Hardly Fenwick, hardly. For a sham stone!"

"It was a wonderful copy. Did you see it?"

"I did. The Rajah showed it to me. It was a palpable imitation."

"I should like to get hold of Smith for half-an-hour," said Mr. Fenwick, his little body swelling with indignation. "He actually made the sale conditionally upon my keeping quiet about the jewel for a month. Of course, he wanted time to get out of the way. The scoundrel! He must have known of the loss of the stone."

"Oh, yes; he was in Bhugerpore at the time. The Rajah told me all about it. The fact is, Fenwick, you are too impetuous; your head is not cool enough for business."

"Don't jeer at me, Christopher." Mr. Fenwick was very humble. "How did your business succeed?"

"Fairly well; indeed, considering everything — very well."

"Christopher, you'll keep this quiet on 'Change, won't you?"

"I give you my word I will."

"Thank you."

"And I don't think I would make a Government affair of it, if I were you," Mr. Christopher said. "You see, receivers of stolen property are not treated very kindly, as a rule."

"Oh, but this was an exceptional case."

"Very exceptional, as far as you are concerned."

"Perhaps I had better leave it alone," Mr. Fenwick reflected. And he did. He was as silent as Mr. Christopher, who kept his word, and never mentioned a single item of the transaction, either on 'Change or anywhere else, with one exception.

On arriving in London, Mr. Christopher took the stone to an expert in Hatton Garden, who, to begin with, uttered an exclamation of surprise, but after careful examination, pronounced it a sham.

"It is a wonderful imitation—might deceive anybody," he said. "There is a method of manipulating rubies, Mr. Christopher. The surface of this is a very thin layer of a genuine, although inferior, stone, and the interior substance has been very cleverly worked. It is a long time since I have seen such a perfect fraud. I trust you have not been victimised."

"No. That stone is an exact copy of a very valuable jewel in India. I have just returned from there, and may say that I have had something to do with the discovery of the fraud."

"I hope your services were well rewarded."

"I am thankful to say that I did not lose money, which at one time I was in danger of doing."

Mr. Christopher paid into his account the half of Mr. Fenwick's ransom money, and the commission he had received from the Rajah. He sighed as he thought of that scoundrel Smith. Mr. Christopher had told him to remember that they were strangers for the future, and he did not expect Mr. Smith would forget.

"The scoundrel!" said Mr. Christopher, as he leant back in his office chair, and blew a tobacco cloud at the clock. "I was never so nearly robbed before. It is fortunate that Fenwick got first audience. The little deal has cost him between eight and nine thousand pounds, and I am something like a thousand pounds in pocket over the transaction. That is, at any rate, better than being robbed by Mr. Smith. There is nothing like a cool head for business. Poor Fenwick! No doubt he will stick to legitimate trading for the future."

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Centuries and a Day.

A ROSE vine clung to the grey stone tower of an ancient castle. In the night, when the moon rose and the bleak highlands lay revealed by the pale light, the rose clung to the tower more closely still and shivered.

"I live but for a day," it said. "Why am I here at all?—Why?" And the anguish and terror of the little rose was intense, as it looked over at the black mountains and the deep, dark valleys, and felt the awfulness of this great world. But the breeze lulled it to rest, saying: "Never mind, sweet rose, there is a reason—sleep!"

When the sunshine flooded and the tower was warmed by its persistent rays, the little rose forgot its fears and would listen with rapture to the story the grey stones told of their life. Centuries and centuries they had lived—far back in the primeval ages. What had they not seen? Volcanoes, glaciers, mad, rushing torrents, earthquakes—centuries and centuries of wonders

"We are made of consolidated sediments," said the stones. "Once we were soft, like sand, and some time in the far, far future, we will be decomposed again into the same. And so the cycle goes on and we will live for ever. We have seen the wonders of the earth unfold before us!"

The little rose marvelled at this strange existence. "And I live but for one day!" it moaned. "I shall never see these beautiful things!"

The rose envied the stones.

One day, from a window, just above the rose, a girl leaned. "It is the Princess," whispered the stones.

She leant farther, and the breeze fluttered her golden hair. She was even more beautiful than the rose. She stretched down her arm and plucked the flower.

"Good-bye!" said the stones. "Perhaps you may see some of this world's greatness."

The Princess gazed at the rose with a look of pleasure in her eyes that thrilled the flower. "If I give her happiness, but for a moment," it thought, "I have not lived in vain!"

The maiden leant against the casement. Her eyes turned from the rose. She was very still. The sun was sinking—a great ball of fire away off behind the mountains. There came a clatter of hoofs. The girl clasped her hands to her heart, almost crushing the little rose. But through her trembling white fingers it peeped, and saw a cavalier come riding by. He paused beneath the window, and looked up, resting his eyes upon the Princess—as only a lover can.

She looked down. In her eyes was a light so pure, so true. She threw him the rose. And so, quick as it fell, vanished its envy of the stones.

"Ho, ho! for your centuries of earth's wonders—your lofty mountains—your mad, passionate torrents! I have seen the revelation of love!"

So said the little rose, as it was carried away, and over the hills, pressed to a human heart.

A. J. Lyman

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Through the Multitude of Business

By Winifred Graham

Author of "When the Birds Begin to Sing," "Pauper Blue Blood," "On the Down Grade," etc., etc.

I.

"Men are powerless to charm me," laughed Muriel Adeane. "I have been engaged to two, and I don't know which bored me most."

"And now?"

"Now I am free—thank Heaven!"

Miss Adeane was tall and handsome, with a rich olive skin, and eyes that were naturally bright and sparkling. A rather cruel little smile flickered round her mouth as she tore the leaves of a lily with restless fingers. Undoubtedly she was a splendid creature—a genuine "daughter of the gods"—but all too cold in her regal beauty, and so thought the man before her.

"Your flower!" she said, throwing it aside. "Flowers are dangerous things. They sometimes give away our secrets."

"We have no secrets to betray—you and I."

"Speak for yourself, Courtenay," she retorted. "I have no belief in your powers. You mesmerise poor fools who are weak enough to submit. *You* read thoughts—who could not look into my heart, or see one inch below the surface if you died for it. You have great influence over women! But I—I am not a woman."

"What then?"

"God knows! Half a sinner, and a little bit of an angel. I have never sued for forgiveness, and yet, in the eyes of some, I am higher than the stars."

"You do not believe I could curb your will—make you my slave—if I would?"

"Men are powerless to charm me."

"If you would!" she laughed. "What man would not? It is impossible, dear friend. So spare yourself the fruitless task of trying, and the still more aggravating fact of having failed."

"You know," he cried, "the intoxicating joy of success. To utter the very word 'failure' is like touching the sharp edge of a knife. 'Excess' is my motto; 'Success' my king."

"You are a strange man," she murmured softly, "and if you had not sworn to conquer me I might almost like you. Ernest Mitchell repeated your words at the club—told me about your bet. Your friends say you cannot win me in one month, and that I am going to marry Earl Pembroke—or his money—so I hear."

"Mitchell is a babbling cur! Why do you listen to him?"

"I don't listen. He talks to me, and sometimes I overhear. He has a sharp, penetrating voice, that hurts my head."

"It is twelve o'clock," he said, pointing to the time. "The first of the month."

The music, alluring and soft, stole from the ball-room, and wailed among the palms.

"Do you see that woman in the long black gown?" asked Muriel Adeane.

"The girl with hazel hair and a very white forehead?"

"Yes. She is beautiful. Her jewels are finer than mine."

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"What of that?"

"Look!" pointing to the retreating figure. "How she is laughing! Her husband cut his throat at dinner, and they say she gets drunk every night."

"Grief is devoured in flames," he replied. "God made women weak."

"Finish the sentence. He trusted their defence to man's generosity."

"I will be generous, if you will be weak!"

Miss Adeane drew her skirts aside, with a deprecating gesture.

"What quaint witchcraft you practice! It is so obscurely veiled one cannot feel even a little fluttered or confused. Poor Courtenay!"

He looked straight into her eyes—so straight that she almost thought he had struck her. A strange, stunned feeling surged through her brain, and for the moment she was robbed of sight and sense. With a sudden inward fear she sprang to her feet, and then she laughed a soft, rippling peal, which broke from her lips to smother a cry.

"It is light outside," she said, turning to the window. "Why! The day has dawned!"

They glanced up and saw that the clock had stopped. It was still twelve.

"Let us go," said Muriel.

She led the way to the hall. The music was silent and though a few stray guests still lingered, the dance was over. Her chaperon stood cloaked in the doorway awaiting her charge.

Miss Adeane took in the situation at a glance.

"I feel honoured," whispered a voice in her ear, "that I have been able to detain you so long. It shows me I found favour after all." Again his piercing eyes were riveted upon her—and they seemed to burn and burn. "I am glad—most glad," he continued. "Have you not one word for me at parting?"

"You are cruel," she replied. "I think you're the sort of man who would ill-treat his animals."

All that night Muriel could not sleep. She told herself it was over-fatigue, and was horrified at the dark lines beneath her eyes in the morning.

"I will ride," she said. "There is nothing so refreshing as a good gallop."

She started out, turning her horse's head towards the Row—then hesitated. Some intuition warned her not to go. She seldom believed in presentiments, but this one startled her. A desperate longing to get out of town made her decide on Richmond Park as the best place for a canter, and the thought became more delightful as she rode on. "Richmond Park." These two words rang in her ears. She longed for a sight of the deer and the shady trees, the large expanse of soft green turf. Faster she urged her steed—away from the city of London to sweeter, purer air. As her horse passed through the gates into the grass beyond, another rider came in sight. At first Muriel did not recognise him, but as he approached, a vague dread crept over her, and a second later Courtenay Somerville was at her side.

"I thought you would come," he said excitedly. "I knew it!"

"Don't talk so loudly, or my groom will hear. I never meant to meet you."

A flush of anger spread its tell-tale crimson over her cheek, and then left it paler than before.

"I willed it," he whispered mysteriously. "I made you come. It was to prove my power!"

She laughed scornfully, turning her mocking eyes upon him.

"If such power can give you a pleasant companion at every turn, what a useful gift to possess! My friend! I cannot take all you say *au grand sérieux*. It would be too ridiculous."

"You blind yourself to all that displeases you, but the day will come when you must and shall believe."

"I hope you do not try your experiments on nervous girls. It might frighten them. As to me—you may 'will' me as you like, for I never consider anybody but myself. I stand at my own helm, and no other hand can guide me."

Her pride and self-assurance amused him. He smiled, and Muriel noticed his eyes were filled with cunning, while the touch of his fingers on the horse's mane caused the animal to start and shiver, as though charged with electricity.

"Are you going to the McClintocks' to-night? They have a musical evening."

"If you intend to honour them," replied Courtenay, "I shall be there."

Miss Adeane looked at her admirer critically. He was a fine specimen of manhood—bold, handsome, tall, and young. She felt a little glad he loved her. The intercourse of hearts was sweet.

When they returned, Courtenay knew he had advanced a step nearer the victory.

That night they met again. Miss Adeane declared the music was not good, and Courtenay led the way to a balcony, where a low lounge had been placed. Muriel settled herself among the cushions, and gazed vaguely out into the darkness.

"I don't know why I came," she said at last. "I think it was because I wanted to see you."

"How very flattering," he replied with a wave of her fan which he was holding. But the air it created seemed heated to Muriel, and she took it from him.

"Do not imagine it is your irresistible fascination, for at times I almost hate you. Your presence overpowers me!" she declared.

A short laugh broke from his lips and rang out on the evening breeze, as, rising excitedly, he leant against the railings. They were the only occupants of the balcony, and Muriel tried to rise also, for she longed to get away from him.

"Take me in," she said faintly. A deadly sense of fatigue crept over her. She glanced up and saw his eyes glistening. "Please do not look at me like that, I cannot stand it."

"Own that I have a little power over you," he whispered in reply, gazing more fixedly. "Own it, once for all."

She tried to smile and rise, denying there could be any truth in his assertion. She would fain have laughed him to scorn, but no words came. Miss Adeane remained among the cushions mute and staring in front of her as one in a trance.

"Come!" he said steadily. "You are not yourself. I will take you in."

Courtenay Somerville knew well what he had done, and felt no surprise that even before his victim staggered to her feet, she fell back helpless, while her head sank heavily upon the sofa. It was not the first time he had mesmerised a woman. For fully ten minutes he stood watching the sleeping girl, and not attempting to wake her—his ambition gratified—his conquest attained. She was white to the very lips, and scarcely appeared to breathe at all. Presently he took one limp hand firmly in his, rapping her sharply on the forehead with the other.

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"Wake up!" he cried imperiously. "Do you hear me? Wake up!"

Muriel heaved a sigh, and moved her head. There was a slight stir among the silken pillows, and then she raised herself wearily, while she clung to him—trembling and weeping.

"Courtenay!" she gasped. "Courtenay, don't leave me! I am so frightened."

In a moment his arms were round her, and their strong support brought comfort.

"You love me?" she murmured. "What a beautiful dream!"

"Yes," he replied, "and to-morrow, Muriel, you will marry me?"

"To-morrow!" She passed her hand over her forehead, and tried to think. Then she said again: "To-morrow!"

"Your aunt will be away, and I shall fetch you, during her absence, in my carriage. I knew you would consent to-night, and I have made all arrangements."

She laid her hand on his shoulder.

"I know nothing now except that I love you. When the spell is broken we will talk of marriage."

The following day, as he had said, Muriel was left alone. She remembered but vaguely the events of the previous evening, till Courtenay Somerville's appearance brought them back only too vividly.

"I have come to fetch you," he said, "as I promised last night. A drive will do you good, and on the way I will tell you where we are going."

Miss Adeane did not know why, but she obeyed him like a child, and she did not realise until they were speeding through the streets that the object of their drive was without explanation.

"We are going to a registry office," he told her. "Love cannot wait. It is now or never! You must marry me to-day or not at all!"

"To-day then let it be!" she cried, clasping her hands. "I would sooner die than lose you."

"I only hope your devotion is sincere!"

"Yes; I have never been denied anything. I require you above all the world."

For fully ten minutes he stood watching the sleeping girl.

"This is romantic. It reminds me of the dark ages. We are off to Gretna Green!"

So they talked on till the horses drew up in front of a house, into which Courtenay led the way. Muriel signed her name mechanically, but her mind was a blank, and she could hardly recollect what had taken place as they passed out.

"Where are we going?" she asked, turning her flushed face to Courtenay.

"I am taking you back to your home," he replied coldly, and his voice sounded strained and hard.

She started involuntarily.

"Why?" she gasped. "What are *you* going to do?"

"I shall go abroad to-morrow alone."

"But I do not understand. We are married!"

"Then let me explain. The whole thing has been a play! I have won my bet, and you, I hope, have learnt a lesson. You, who had broken so many hearts, dared me to try my power. Now that I have shown you the full force of that power, I am going away. The little trick that has been played will be kept as secret as the grave. Ernest Mitchell was the man who handed you the paper and watched you sign. He disguised himself. The others were also men I know, and they came to witness it themselves. They could hardly believe their eyes! Here is the paper. Keep it, or tear it in a thousand atoms, and fling it into the fire of forgetfulness. Ours was no marriage, and you will find there is not even any writing on the sheet where you signed your name. Imagination led you to believe there was. You were mesmerised at the time."

A cry of despair broke from Muriel's lips.

"It was wicked, cruel, and yet—yet—I loved you, and I think I love you still! You shall not leave me! Now that you have proved to your friends I am willing to take you, it is your duty to marry me. I will not blame you, but claim you as my right."

"My dear lady," he answered softly, "such a thing is impossible. Women have no power to charm my soul, thank Heaven! I am free, and intend to remain so."

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Miss Adeane leant back in the carriage and stifled a sob. Her teeth were clenched, and there was a dangerous look in her eyes.

"You were right," she muttered at last. "I *was* mesmerised. I hated you from the first, and I have always despised you in my heart. Your very touch is pollution; your every word an insult. When we meet again, Mr. Somerville, I will repay you."

The carriage had drawn up, and she sprang from it eagerly, refusing his proffered aid. Her eyes blazed with indignation as he bowed her a last farewell.

"*Au revoir*," she said in her low, musical voice, which reached his ear, and his alone. "Not until I am equal with you will I say adieu!"

"Forewarned is forearmed," he answered, raising his hat. "Besides, revenge never satisfies. Only the ignorant practise it, and the foolhardy feel its whip."

"Then I think you will suffer!" Muriel replied slowly, as she turned away.

II.

"Nothing is bad enough for men!" said Muriel. "They do so much harm in the world. It is well to give them a rub back sometimes!"

Her aunt looked up, surprised. "My dear child, I am sure you have no old scores to remember, and even if you had, it would be more Christian to forget them, now fate has been so good to you."

"I suppose it is tremendously lucky to come into a huge fortune at four-and-twenty, and to have such a sweet creature as you, Aunt Cicely, to bear with me in all my moods. Yet, still I pity women! Especially those unfortunate individuals who have nothing to recommend them. I should die under the misfortune of an ugly face. When a man falls in love he can plead his own cause, but women have to wrap their unasked affection away in aching hearts, and only too often the secret love, that descends hidden to the grave, is the best and purest that the world can give. Wasted, yet still unquenched, it burns internally, eating its way like a deadly cancer into the soul."

"Why, Muriel, one would almost think you had been crossed in love."

"What an absurd idea! No; I was talking of the whole sex, and showing you they are at a disadvantage. I have entirely left myself out of the argument, for, of course, I could buy a husband any day."

"You have so many friends it would indeed be strange if amongst them you had not many admirers."

"People talk of being 'in love,' but they never name the opposite state of mind and become 'in hate.' How odd it would be to say: 'I have fallen in hate!' Would it not?"

Mrs. Vincent smiled. She was so unoriginal herself that she considered Muriel the most entertaining companion imaginable, and hung upon her words with flattering interest.

"By-the-way, Aunt Cicely, do you happen to remember Mr. Somerville?"

"Yes. He has been absent a long while; we have not seen him for years. He left, I remember, rather suddenly, and I mentally added him to the list of your victims."

"He has returned to town, and I have asked him to come and see me."

"When do you expect him?"

"This very afternoon."

"I had promised to go to the Gordons' 'At Home.'"

"By all means fulfil your engagement, as I can quite well receive him alone."

"I shall not be gone long, my dear."

"Oh, do not hurry on my account! I have frequently entertained a host of visitors while you were enjoying a peaceful siesta upstairs, far away through the ivory gate of dreams. Go, my good aunt, and amuse yourself. Drink a lot of tea and talk any amount of scandal!"

"Muriel, you know I never pull my acquaintances to pieces."

"Not literally—and, after all, speech is our own, to use as we please. Half the flavour of conversation would vanish if an Act of Parliament were passed to bridle tongues."

Muriel flung herself into an easy chair, and picked up a book.

"Good-bye, Aunt Cicely," she said, without raising her eyes.

She sat alone, perfectly still, for a long time, with the book open before her, but unread, and then started suddenly. Someone was coming upstairs, and she sprang to her feet, holding her breath. Muriel expected to see Courtenay Somerville, instead of whom Henry Erskine entered the room, and she went forward to greet him with mixed feelings of disappointment and relief. He was her old and trusted solicitor—a man she had known all her life, and who took the entire management of her affairs. She consulted him in everything, and had perfect confidence in his judgment.

"I have called several times lately," he said, "in hopes of finding you alone."

"So you chose my 'At Home' day," she replied laughing.

"Unfortunately, and twice I have found you out."

"What have you to say that is so secret and important?"

Mr. Erskine looked at her steadily.

"Perhaps you will be annoyed with me for mentioning it, but I am going to give you a word of advice simply from a sense of duty and friendship."

"You mystify me."

"Well, I will come to the point at once. Miss Adeane, you have made a very undesirable acquaintance. Forgive me for blackening your friend, but you have no father—no one who could warn you against him."

"And his name?"

"Mervyn Dalbiac, one of the cleverest swindlers of the day. He has initiated himself into your good graces because you are rich. His trade is a very simple one. He will probably lead you to believe he is a great financier, and offer to treble your fortune in a couple of months. He will do you out of thousands if you fall into his trap. Don't listen to his schemes, and steer clear of the money market. He has been the ruin of numerous unwary speculators, and is on the hunt for more. It is his business. I am speaking plainly, for it is my privilege to warn you, as I consider him one of the greatest blackguards in the city. I was perfectly horrified when I met him at your house."

"You astonish me! I have always looked upon Mr. Dalbiac as a most harmless individual. But do you really think so badly of him?"

"Indeed, I was never more in earnest in my life. Your interests, Miss Adeane, concern me, and in this case I am absolutely certain caution is necessary."

"Then let me thank you heartily for your valuable advice. I know you are the truest friend I have in the world."

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"You will not pin your faith to him if he spreads the most tempting nets and opens gold mines at your feet?"

"No. When he commences a great harangue on finance I shall know what to expect."

"Now I have unburdened my mind I must leave you, for my time is precious; and forgive this very fleeting visit, as well as the advice you have taken so kindly."

"It is most kind of you to spare me even two minutes of your valuable day."

As Henry Erskine left her, Courtenay Somerville was announced.

Muriel welcomed him cordially, extending her hand with a smile.

"You are quite a stranger," she said sweetly.

"Yes; and I trust you will regard me as such, for

Muriel welcomed him cordially.

strangers may grow into friends—that is, if you can forgive and forget the past?"

"It may seem strange that I should wish to see you after our parting, but I am a little wiser now. I thought I knew the world then, when I tempted you to prove your power. We cease playing with fire when our fingers get burnt! You taught me my mistake, yet I do not blame you. It was humiliating at the time, but, believe me, I have swept it from my mind like a dream of the night."

"I hardly dared to hope for so much kindness."

"Do you know, I quite enjoy discussing old times."

"I think the new ones are still more interesting."

"Perhaps; but I have so much to occupy me now, since a turn of fortune's wheel made me one of the richest women in England."

"And you still live with your aunt?"

"Oh, yes! She is a sort of niece to me. We—the orphan and the widow—both feel sadly destitute of family ties."

"Yet half the world might envy you!"

"Men, doubtless, covet my money, and I can feel with them, for I was not always rich. They would sacrifice everything to the golden calf when the fever is once on them. Like Judas, they touch the accursed coin, and give up their lives to buying, selling, and getting gain, and when the end comes——"

"Do not talk of that," interrupted Courtenay. "Live in the present, die in the present, and leave the 'after' vague."

Muriel sighed. He drew his chair closer and leant forward.

"I cannot tell you how delighted I am to be with you again. You will never know the remorse I have suffered, nor how bitterly I regret the past. I believe I was possessed of a devil!"

"Very likely, there are plenty of them about."

"Oh, please do not laugh!"

"Why?"

"I cannot bear to see others cheerful when I am sad," he muttered with downcast eyes.

"As selfish as ever!"

He glanced up and saw the calm, sweet look return to her face, that look which only dwelt there in her happiest moments, and though she spoke jestingly, there was sympathy in her eyes.

"What a fool I was once!" he thought, grinding his teeth.

"Why are you unhappy?"

"The world has been treating me badly. While it has given you everything, it has left me practically destitute."

"You have spent your substance in riotous living, and now you are grinding the husks."

"You jump at conclusions. I was relying on an uncle, who is the head of a large firm in the City, to start me in business. However, he has just married a widow with four sons, all over six feet, and will do nothing for me."

"How very unfortunate! But why despair? There is a 'multitude of business.'"

"Not for men like me."

"Why?"

"I have no capital."

"I am glad you told me, for it is terrible to be cramped for the sake of a helping hand. If ever it be in my power, I will show you there are still such things as true forgiveness and undying friendship lingering in this dark world."

Before he had time to thank her, their *solitude à deux* was interrupted by Mrs. Vincent's return, and the conversation drifted to general topics, only occasionally his eyes met hers, in a swift glance of mutual confidence.

"Will you dine with us to-morrow?" Muriel said, as he rose to go. "Mervyn Dalbiac is coming, and I should like you to meet him."

Courtenay gladly accepted. His hopes ran high, and the prize he had once so scornfully discarded now offered the only way of escape from the cramping clasp of poverty.

III.

After their first meeting Miss Adeane frequently entertained Mervyn Dalbiac and Courtenay Somerville. They struck up a friendship that she encouraged in

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every possible way, and while Courtenay's visits occurred daily, Mr. Dalbiac's became more numerous and lengthy than of yore.

"You are not looking well," the latter told her one day as they were sitting together in her boudoir. "You have been shutting yourself up and losing your interest in society."

"Yes, it is early days to grow tired of pleasure; but the fact is I am heartily sick of a perpetual round of gaiety."

"It is quite strange to hear you talk so seriously."

"Oh, I am not such a frivolous being as you imagine, Mr. Dalbiac! I can be sensible sometimes. Men sneer at our sex and think us empty-headed. If they would treat us as their equals they might find out what we really are."

"But women cannot share our graver interests. Look at business, for instance. They do not understand ——"

"There you are wrong! I, for one, take the keenest interest in finance. I have often longed to talk to you on the subject."

Mr. Dalbiac's eyes glistened. "It is my daily occupation to increase the fortunes of others," he said. "Everything I touch turns to gold."

"That is because you are so clever. Oh, it is wonderful to be such a great financier. There is nothing in the world I admire more in a man."

"Miss Adeane, I am delighted to hear you speak so, as I am deeply absorbed at present in a scheme which is practically bound to succeed. It will prove a trump card for all concerned—a master-stroke of business!"

"I should like to hear about it, if it is anything in which I could buy a share. I have promised to help Courtenay Somerville, who is a very old and dear friend of mine, and should this prove anything in which I could interest him, and if by its means I could help him to amass a fortune on his own account, I would gladly supply the capital. You understand?"

"Perfectly. You were always generous!"

"He is really in straitened circumstances, and for a man of his social standing it is utter beggary. I cannot bear to think of the penury some endure, while their moneyed friends continue to live on the fat of the land, without raising a finger to help them. Friends, indeed! That is not my idea of friendship!"

"What noble sentiments!" ejaculated Mr. Dalbiac, raising his eyes.

"Now, if you will tell me your scheme," said Muriel, "I will give you my undivided attention."

"Candidly, I do not think you will be disappointed. I myself am infatuated with the idea. A friend of mine has discovered a wonderful application of electricity, which will revolutionise the present lighting system. The electric light is acknowledged to be the very best, the only drawback being its costliness. Under his invention, the cost will be reduced to a minimum, and the benefit of it placed in the hands of the million. The profits are quite incalculable, and the only thing wanted now to produce it on a scale to show its practicability is capital."

He spoke excitedly, and Miss Adeane seemed to have caught his ardour, her eyes brightened, she bent forward involuntarily.

"Go on—I am listening."

Mr. Dalbiac, encouraged by her interest, broached the most important subject.

"If you feel inclined to find this capital," he said, "I will enter more fully into details."

Muriel replied she had already told him so.

"But," she added, "I must confess my knowledge of business is limited. I cannot gauge what amount would be required."

"As you entertain the proposal, I will evolve my plans. The process is simplicity itself. The only marvel is that it should have remained so long overlooked by more scientific electricians. Under the present system the electricity is produced by a motor, and, through a process which I need not describe, makes a thread inclosed in a glass vacuum in a state of incandescence, which gives the light. The amount of electricity consumed is very great, and hence its heavy cost. Now my friend has discovered that by filling this vacuum with a certain species of gas, and by passing a very slight current, which can be procured from a small battery, this gas becomes highly illuminated, and gives out many times the light of the present incandescent burner at a nominal cost. Now picture to yourself for a moment a light that must supersede every other, costing a hundredth part of the best at present known. Think what it would be in your own house—no gas bills, no electric light bills, and your lighting rates reduced to the vanishing point! It would be the greatest boon of modern times! Its brilliancy is dazzling—bewildering. It would flood our streets, our houses, our theatres, with a wealth obtained by no other artificial means. We should rise, as it were, from a chaos of darkness, and bless the man whose fertile brain had organised so marvellous a public benefit!"

Mr. Dalbiac spoke quickly, without pausing. He continued his subject in a lower tone, however, and there was a touch of regret in his voice.

"I have only one feeling of hesitation, Miss Adeane," he said thoughtfully, "and that is pity for the unfortunate shareholders in gas and electric light companies. It is, alas! a terrible look-out for them! But, after all, we cannot prevent their downfall. The few must suffer for the many—the individual for the nation. It can be kept for an after-consideration whether, out of the millions which must flow into our pockets, we should set apart a sum for their relief. Prosperity should not permit us to neglect the duty we owe to the poverty-stricken people—ruined through our success."

"How charitable you are!" said Muriel softly. "Very few men would have such a thought in the midst of their own triumph. I decidedly favour your praiseworthy suggestion."

Then she went into the question of how much capital would be required to rake in these millions, hardly suppressing her inclination to ask him whether they might not eventually immortalise their names by paying off the National Debt. The amount seemed startlingly small—only £10,000 cash, and £10,000 in shares of a syndicate company of £20,000—of which she was to provide the money.

"I will readily assent to that," said Miss Adeane, upon hearing the sum, "on two conditions."

Mr. Dalbiac could hardly conceal his surprise. Why had he not trebled the figure? Suppressing his vexation, he said simply:

"What are your conditions, Miss Adeane?"

"First, that Mr. Somerville looks thoroughly into the matter and advises me upon it. Secondly, that the prospectus be advertised once in one daily paper, so that I may feel the public have had a chance of participating to some small exent in this El Dorado."

Muriel's reply staggered Mr. Dalbiac. For a moment there was a pause, and she noticed a dark shadow flit

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across his face. Then he broke into a tirade upon the ingratitude of the public, and the waste of their future profits, for a mere sentiment. But Miss Adeane stuck to her point, asking, as she silenced his objections, how much of the capital she was to be allowed to take.

She . . . . looked out at the sun.

"The whole of the cash capital," he replied; "£10,000."

A few details as to how this sum was to be disposed of had to be gone into, and the form of the prospectus to be considered.

"Nine thousand of it," said Mr. Dalbiac, "is to go to my friend the inventor, and one thousand to be used for publicly showing the light."

He enlarged upon the fortunate circumstances for her that his friend was so pressed for money he was obliged to take it, instead of shares, for his invention. Their conversation ended by a promise from Mr. Dalbiac that Somerville should benefit by being appointed a director, and a reminder on her part that his certificate as to the *bonâ fides* of the concern should appear on the prospectus.

Mr. Dalbiac left in the highest spirits, and went straight to Courtenay Somerville, to whom he explained in glowing terms what had passed. A meeting between them in the City on the following day was then agreed upon.

Muriel appeared greatly agitated when she was again alone. Her face had grown paler, and her lips trembled. She paced the room in that restless impetuous manner which denotes a mind ill at ease.

"I cannot help it," she muttered under her breath, struggling with a stormy gust of passion. "It is fight for yourself in this world. Revenge your wrongs measure for measure. God alone knows my grievance rankled till it turned my soul to gall."

She went to the window and looked out at the sun.

"It is shining!" she said. "Shining like a great globe of electrified gas."

IV.

Courtenay knew nothing of business, and his ideas on the subject were decidedly vague. It gratified his vanity that he had been able to reassert his influence over Miss Adeane, upon renewing her acquaintance. Now her friendship—ah! more than that—her love, could be of service to him, and his heart grew buoyant at the thought.

He met Mr. Dalbiac at the appointed hour in his office, where the latter explained the invention even more graphically than on the previous afternoon. In a corner of the room sat an insignificant individual, who evidently with an effort suppressed adding the deferential "Sir" to every reply he made to Mr. Dalbiac's questions. He was Mark Snewleigh, the inventor of the "World's Lighting Revolution." When the matter had been thoroughly explained to Somerville, the prospectus was placed before him for his approval. Mr. Dalbiac drew his attention to a brilliant light in the office, and proceeded in a most bewildering and voluminous manner to describe its action. Having done so, he handed him a letter for his signature, addressed to Mark Snewleigh—the wording being as follows:

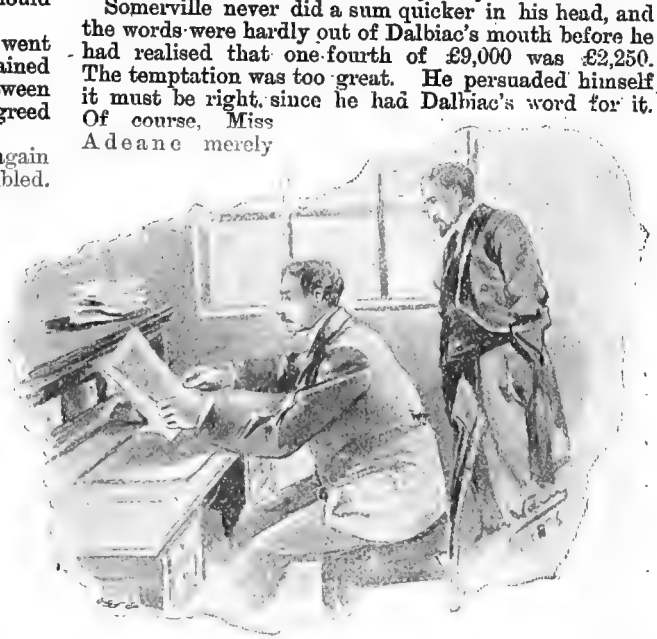
Sir,—I agree to accept a seat on the Board of the "Gazelectro Lighting Syndicate," having thoroughly satisfied myself of its practicability and adaptability. I have also satisfied myself that the cost per candle power is not more than one-tenth of that of any known light. It must, therefore, unquestionably revolutionise the lighting of the civilised world.

As Courtenay ran his eye over the document, his face assumed a puzzled expression, and he read it twice before speaking, the second time more carefully than the first. Then he laid it down, and remarked in tones denoting surprise:

"But how can I sign such a letter, when I don't know the facts to which I am certifying?"

"I can satisfy you at once," replied Mr. Dalbiac promptly, and proceeded to describe, in a technical and very confusing manner, batteries, currents, gases, vacuums, candle-power, etc., till Somerville felt undecided as to whether he knew all or nothing about the subject in question. In his indecision Dalbiac fired his big gun and hit the target. "I omitted to tell you," he said, with his bland smile, "that the vendor here, who is being paid partly in cash for his invention, recognises the fact of the enormous value to him of your knowledge in business matters, and wishes you to accept one-fourth of the money for your services."

Somerville never did a sum quicker in his head, and the words were hardly out of Dalbiac's mouth before he had realised that one-fourth of £9,000 was £2,250. The temptation was too great. He persuaded himself it must be right, since he had Dalbiac's word for it. Of course, Miss Adeane merely requested his opinion out of compliment, and there could be little doubt the thing was perfectly genuine. Thus he argued with his conscience, Mr. Dalbiac urging



Courtenay ran his eye over the document.

him the while, till finally his irresolution turned to decision. He came to the conclusion that the letter was concise enough, and signed his name in full.

He bent his head in assent.

"The Board of Directors," said Mr. Dalbiac, "will consist of you, the inventor, and myself."

Courtenay looked furtively towards Mark Snewleigh, who had been silent throughout. He appeared utterly incapable of revolutionising anything, and merely assented, somewhat nervously, when referred to by Mr. Dalbiac.

"These clever people appear to have very little to say for themselves," thought Somerville wonderingly.

"We can have a larger Board if you wish it," continued Dalbiac hastily, "but, if you will give the time and work, I think it would be a pity to reduce the fees by further division. The emolument for the Board I propose should be £500 a year; you, as chairman, taking £300, and the vendor dividing the remainder with me. Besides this, it should be arranged for a percentage of the profits to come to the Board, which would bring you in a very handsome income."

As Somerville's mind imbibed all this, the sudden overwhelming good fortune seemed too wonderful to be true.

He announced his intention on parting with Dalbiac of going at once to see Miss Adeane.

"You can tell her exactly how matters stand, Somerville," he said, "for she is a thorough business woman, and has a wonderful head. She takes a thing in directly, and is quite astoundingly sharp."

Courtenay detained Miss Adeane's little gloved hand longer than usual upon meeting her in the hall.

"I was starting for a drive," she said.

"I have come to thank you most heartily," he murmured, "for all you are about to do for me. I cannot express my gratitude—I should be thanking you every moment of the day."

He spoke so earnestly that for a moment her heart stood still. She then turned away from him with a shudder.

"For Heaven's sake don't thank me! I *detest* being thanked. I would rather you never mentioned the matter again. I do not want gratitude, for to me it is of all things the most hateful."

Her harsh tone jarred on his feelings, and her retort confused him. She noticed his discomfort, and tried to make amends, while her voice became pleading and persuasive.

"You won't thank me any more?" she said, and her eyes were so grave that it gave her whole face a mournful expression. "It is the one thing I ask you in return."

He bent his head in assent.

"Mr. Dalbiac is a great financier," she said, changing the subject; "I have perfect confidence in all he does. You may safely rely on his judgment, and be guided by him in everything, as there is no doubt he is an exceptionally clever man. Here is Aunt Cicely. You will come with us?"

He appreciated her objection to being thanked, and followed her to the carriage, with a thrill of happiness quivering through his frame.

V.

Gazelectricity progressed steadily, and the prospectus appeared in due course in one daily paper, Mr. Dalbiac being careful to select the least likely to bring it under public notice. Miss Adeane had a copy of the newspaper, and one of the prospectus, both of which she locked carefully away in her safe. The response from the British public was small, owing to the limited circulation of the chosen daily. Nevertheless, it came into the hands of sufficient very young men and guileless old ladies to extract from them a total of £5,000. The shares were duly allotted, and the same fate befell Miss Adeane's application for the remaining £5,000. The first payment made by the company was £2,250 to Courtenay Somerville and the next £6,750 to the vendor. After this Somerville was told there would be no active business done for some time.

Dining at the Savoy.

One night he was dining at the Savoy with his friend, Jack Percival, a young solicitor, to whom he enlarged on his good fortune.

"It is quite a new line of business for me," he said cheerfully, "the directorship of a company. I never had much of a head for that sort of thing, but this is quite sound. It has paid me already £2,250 as a start, and the joke of it is they wanted to get hold of me for my knowledge! I suppose Miss Adeane stuffed them up. Dalbiac got her to put the money into it."

"I hope you were properly advised in the first place,

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for it is a dangerous thing nowadays to put your name to a prospectus. Who looked into the contracts for you to see if they were properly drawn?"

Somerville hesitated and began to feel rather a fool. "I—well, to tell you the truth, I never saw a contract."

His friend grew suddenly grave, and told him he had acted most rashly. Jack Percival could put a case clearly, and showed him his mistake in such a new and unpleasant light, that he became thoroughly alarmed. The folly of his implicit faith in Dalbiac presented itself to his mind in a painfully aggravating manner, till he worked himself into a perfect fever of apprehension.

"I have no doubt it is all right, old fellow," said Jack consolingly. "Don't worry over it to-night, but these things have a nasty way of tricking one sometimes, and of turning out in a confoundedly awkward way."

"I have an appointment with Dalbiac to-morrow in the City. Will you come with me and look into the matter? I shall not rest till my doubts are dispelled. You have made me most horribly uncomfortable."

After asking some further particulars of the company, Jack readily agreed to accompany him.

* * * * *

Miss Adeane was lounging in the luxurious apartment she called her sanctum. The day was hot and depressing, and she had fallen half asleep over a novel. Every luxury conducive to ease and comfort met her eyes as she raised them drowsily, and let them wander round. Numerous quaint and grotesque embellishments caught her gaze at every turn, and each detail of wealth and splendour gave her a delicious sense of satisfaction. She looked dreamily at the velvet tapestries and costly decorations, and from them to the paintings, the flowers, and the sculpture.

Courtenay Somerville broke in upon her reverie, and she rose to greet him with her ready smile. His hand as she took it was deathly cold.

"I am in great trouble," he said tremulously. "Something very terrible has happened."

Muriel showed no sign of surprise.

"Dalbiac has disappeared," he continued, while his voice sounded hollow. "I have been duped and fooled! Percival first opened my eyes. We went together to find him, but he had gone and left no address. The Gazelectricity was a snare, a fraud, and I—I have been their tool. I was induced to accept part of the purchase money, which I have spent, and have no means of replacing. The shareholders can come down on me for this, while they can prosecute me for giving a fraudulent certificate since I was a director, and receiving money as a vendor, without disclosing the fact on the prospectus. I come here to throw myself upon your mercy, Miss Adeane. To implore you of your boundless wealth to buy up all the shares in the hands of the public, and to bury the company, and so prevent my being exposed to ruin and disgrace. I know you will do this, for you sacrificed so much to help me. You could not wish your good intentions to put me in so terrible a position."

Courtenay tried to suppress his emotion and speak calmly, but Muriel's utter indifference only excited him the more in his overwrought condition. He had looked for the ready sympathy—the kindly pity—and he feasted his eyes hungrily upon her, as though seeking a ray of hope.

"It is all very well for you to come and tell me this," she answered with a shrug of her shoulders, "but you looked into the matter, and certified to its accuracy upon the prospectus."

"Fool that I was!" he broke in angrily, "to be tempted by such a bait."

"Consequently, Mr. Somerville," she continued, eyeing

Courtenay Somerville broke in upon her reverie.

him with languid disapproval, "*you* are responsible."

"I know it! I know it!" he replied, struggling to retain his self-command. "But I was tricked and cheated by your friend. The light was never produced by the means he represented—the means to which I was deluded into certifying. Perhaps you have not realised my position to its full extent——"

She held up her hand. "I must ask you not to worry me with details. I understand the facts as clearly as you do yourself."

"You mean you will not raise a hand to save me?" he asked breathlessly.

"Did you consider me when you made me the butt of that cruel jest?" replied Muriel slowly, and her face flushed hotly as she spoke.

For a moment Courtenay was too dazed to answer. He could hardly grasp her meaning. His lips moved, but he said nothing.

She watched him in silence as he clung to the back of a chair. The evil triumph of her nature flashed out in pitiless exultation, while the pent-up hatred of years blazed forth from her eyes, and a victorious, jeering laugh broke from her lips. She had conquered his influence and revelled in it.

"You have courted your torture," she said at last. "You have implanted with your own hand this desire in my heart to see you fall. I have had but one toil, one aim, one hope. To level you to the dust as you lowered me."

Her words vibrated with cruel intensity, and it was sweet to her to see the man she hated quivering from head to foot with blanched face, while his control forsook him; to note the amazed fixity into which his features set, as he gazed at her in a mute stupor! Once he would have spoken, but she stayed him with a gesture.

"My plans were laid as deeply as was your plot to entrap me," she continued, still with the same mocking smile, "and, notwithstanding your age and experience, you walked as unwarily into my net as a child, comparatively. I have encircled your life with the iron bonds of retribution! Have you forgotten how you humiliated me? Remember it now! Had the past glided from your mind as a buried episode? Let it

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rise from its grave to see justice! You became accursed and abhorrent to me from the day when you first made me your toy and put me to open ridicule to win a paltry bet. You thought the fury of the storm had abated! After a lapse of years you did not reckon upon a yawning gulf beneath the electric glare. Your eyes were blinded by flattery and artifice, and you thought that fortune's fingers were already in your grasp when you held my hand and whispered words of devotion! Oh! a man can little realise that a woman may have the soul of an avenger; that she can strike him down and break his spirit, as he would fain have broken hers. He cannot believe her heart is hard so long as her lips smile and her voice sounds softly on his ear!"

Muriel turned her scornful eyes full upon him with haughty power and bitter irony. The disdain of the look seemed to wither him up like a devouring flame, and involuntarily he stretched out his arms.

"For the mercy of God remember what you have brought me to," he cried, hoarse with anguish and breathless with despair. "Your vengeance condemns me to death in life! I shall be arrested unless I fly the country. Oh, how could I be so blind to your merciless scheming? In the glory of your exultation may the vileness of your sin find you out! When the ashes of an overpowering fate have hidden me for ever from your sight, may your own conscience condemn you and cheat you of your fiendish joy. Though your proud and ice-cold heart may never own regret, some bitter sadness will sigh through the memories of your youth when you think of the man you wrecked and ruined to satisfy a devil's craving!"

Her eyes remained with their gaze riveted upon Courtenay as he spoke. The supreme moment of her life had come! No words could move her to mercy, while the hard smile which still flickered round her lips silenced the plea that trembled on his tongue and changed it to a curse. Then Muriel, with a sudden impulse, crossed the room, and in the unbroken silence rang the bell.

"We are quits," she said, with pitiless self-possession. "This makes us equal. You deserve your fate. If you remember once I only said *au revoir*—now, Mr. Somerville, I will say adieu!"

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The Romance of an Australian Christmas Tree.

JOHN RAINUPP, the driver, had been speculating upon the white-haired stranger on the seat beside him ever since the North Queensland coach left the railway station. He wanted a square look into his eyes before venturing a "feeler," but the big slouched hat prevented that. So, as they got within sight of the town on the slopes ahead of them, the old driver turned his attention to the only other passenger on the box, and pointed out the buildings that came into view.

"And that's the orphanage," he continued, pointing to a white building in the midst of a grove of evergreen trees on the brow of the slope ahead of them. "Percival Hanson's money started it, but they have hard work to keep it going. Always hampered for funds, unlucky from the first start fifteen years ago. They had a fire, then they were robbed of a round sum——"

"Robbed? Who would rob orphans?" interrupted the passenger.

"Well, nobody expected it of Dick when he was trusted with the money. He got into wild company, and it went in some kind of speculation that was to double it. Served a sentence in prison for it. Too bad. I suppose he's gone to the dogs since. Precious few ever get over that disgrace. Pity. I knew Dick from a boy. He was awful good-hearted."

"Yes. Robbery of orphans was a fine proof of goodness," returned the old gentleman with cutting sarcasm.

"Well, he only meant to borrow the money," said John.

"Poor excuse to cheat the fatherless," persisted the other with severity.

"There's Millicent Andrews on her way to the orphanage," pursued John, as the coach reached the level beyond the slope. "She's taught the children to sing like nightingales for Christmas. There's to be a tree in the grounds, and a big time."

As he said this the stranger looked up and seemed to regard the young woman in a light muslin garment ahead of them with interest.

"She's done a lot for them first and last, and they worship her," said John. "Queer she don't get married," he added reflectively, as he touched up the greys, "but I don't know a man in Warrady good enough for her."

With the last words the greys dashed round the curve and brought up in fine style before the Warrady Hotel.

The silent stranger was christened "The Mystery" very shortly. He had meals sent to his rooms. "J. H. Afterforth" on the hotel register was as non-committal as his ponderous strapped trunks. Always with hat down, he took long, lonely walks about the town and its outskirts.

He might be a harmless lunatic, it was conjectured, until he was seen to go in and out of the orphanage several times, when it got about that he was a rich, eccentric relative of one of the children, who, if he found all things on the square, was likely to give them a handsome Christmas donation. In fact, Mr. Melladew, the superintendent, admitted that he had hopes a new friend had been raised up to them.

* * * * *

The lawn of the house belonging to Captain Andrews was the centre of attraction on Christmas Eve. Curious rumours were afloat—although the Tree Committee had been personified caution—that the three ponderous trunks were to turn tell-tales, and that "The Mystery" was to have not only a finger but both arms and shoulders, up to his ears, in the festivities.

As the sun set on the warm, Australian Christmas Day, Captain Andrews stepped out of his door, then his wife, then Millicent, to welcome the first arrivals, who came, hurrying, converging from all points, laughing, chattering, wondering what the evening was to bring forth, and all passing into the grounds until the seats provided were full.

Once inside they found themselves in a bower of evergreens, and, of all things, two Christmas trees blazing away in splendour! One, the usual size, hung with the usual quota of Christmas presents, was completely overshadowed by the other, which towered skywards, a very monarch of the woods, wearing its royal honours not unconsciously, but with the air of triumphant, tantalising mystery.

Everybody, from Mr. Merrivale, the minister, to deformed Billy Bowl, the grocer's small boy, was bowing and smiling to everybody else. The orphans were in

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the front seats in gala dress. There was much craning of necks and wondering over the tall tree and the mysterious father thereof, for it was well understood that the white-bearded stranger was the sole author and finisher of this transcendent surprise.

"Mebbe he's the Wandering Jew," suggested Billy Bowl, leaning forward on his crutch towards the tree.

"Looks more like Rip Van Winkle, with his white hair," dissented Ned, the barber's boy, who had lately seen Joe Jefferson from the "heaven" of a Sydney theatre.

"Pooh! Didn't I say he was Santa Claus himself the first day?" was the triumphant query of Ben, the hotel boy.

How these orphans' fingers laced and interlaced, and how their eyes flashed from tree to tree until both seemed to kindle into one blaze! How they aroused Millicent's reassuring smile, with confidence in their own ability to tune their throats when called upon!

In the midst of all, Millicent's eyes had a far-away reminiscent expression of sadness, as if she were occupying a sphere inside the radiant one around her. And "The Mystery," who was in a small shed beyond the platform with the Tree Committee, stood looking through the door at her, so absorbed that Rhoda Barker had to give him a smart shake to call his attention to the mask and toggery in which he must array himself at once.

"There he is! That's 'The Mystery!'" was the cry when Santa Claus, in fantastic array, with snowy head and the jolliest of rubicund faces, came forth flourishing a long wand with ribbon streamers, and took his stand between the two Christmas trees. For a minute the commotion in the air made the evergreens tremble.

The chairman mounted the platform, and after many shouts and much waste of breath brought the meeting to order. At a signal from Millicent, who played a piano accompaniment, the orphans bubbled and overflowed in a joyous Christmas carol which brought everybody into sympathetic unison, and fairly seemed to make the trees join arms and whirl each other round and round from sheer enthusiasm.

"See! see!" was echoed, as half-a-dozen Christmas fairies in misty tulle and spangled wings came filing out into the grounds.

Santa Claus marshalled them round him by quaint and curious flourishes of the wand he carried, and began to despoil the smaller tree. Its fruitage was soon scattered right and left by the dainty little messengers, and then Santa Claus, with more flourishes, turned to the other ready for invasion by the miniature world, which after all only remained for the larger one to plunder.

"Won't he need a long step-ladder to reach the top of it?" queried Billy Bowl.

"You watch him charm the things down," said Ned. "He's a wizard. That wand has magic in it."

"The children of the orphanage will prepare for the lion's share of the plunder," Santa Claus called out in jovial tones, and he broke up the flirtation under the bough abruptly by consigning the youth in a sailor suit to one fairy, and the long-lashed coquette to another, she uttering a little squeak of protest as he did so.

Clothing there was, too, piles of it, from blue and pink Tam-o'-Shanters down to patent-tipped shoes.

Santa Claus stood back from the tree with a view to dispersing the soft clouds clinging to the summit of the tall tree all the evening, as if it had settled down there from the summer sky of the tropics.

A touch of the wand and it materialised into a dainty India shawl. He flourished it aloft airily, turned round on his heels in apparent uncertainty as to its disposal, wound it into a fluffy ball with the wand and tossed it up, caught it dexterously, roved with his eyes all over the audience, balancing it, faced round to Millicent's quarter where the orphans beamed, faced back upon the Tree Committee, again to Millicent, letting his eyes rest upon her, and then everybody, watching his capers, saw the shawl descend and settle in graceful folds over her head and shoulders.

"What is the meaning of that tomfoolery, I wonder?" Captain Andrews muttered under his breath uneasily, and his shapely eyebrows lowered perceptibly as he noticed Millicent's smiling, blushing perplexity.

"So 'The Mystery' has let his mantle fall upon Millicent," remarked Dr. Chalifoux.

"It seems to belong there, doesn't it?" remarked Mr. Melladew, as his clear eyes searched her blonde face in the azure cloud with just a shade of anxiety.

"You know what it all means," challenged the doctor's wife.

"We shall see later," returned Mr. Melladew.

The fairies, having got through with the orphans, were now fluttering like silver butterflies all over the grounds with their hands full. Gift books with cream margins and handsome bindings, more baskets of candied fruits and bonbons, more dolls, and more animals for other children, until it did seem that "The Mystery" had had to find some outlet for his benevolence to avoid bursting outright. Billy Bowl had, besides books and sweetmeats, a complete outfit from top to toe.

At the last minute a small oblong box, with spring clasps was carried in both hands to Mr. Melladew by the eldest of the fairies. There were some conjectures over its contents, as he lifted the lid cautiously and closed it, shutting off the curious from even a peep.

The chairman mounted the table again, got a show of order, after labouring a full quarter of an hour for it, and made them understand that Mr. Melladew had something to say to them.

Mr. Melladew stood holding the mysterious box conspicuously until complete silence had fallen.

"Friends," he began slowly, as if he wished every word to be an apple of gold in a picture of silver, "you will, I think, be glad to know that the money taken from the orphanage funds ten years ago has been restored to us trebled."

He held up the box as he spoke, drew out of it a shining handful of coins, allowing them to fall back with a jingle.

There was a profound sensation.

"The older ones will remember the circumstances," he went on, with a furtive glance at Squire Halliday, "and that there was more of grief than indignation among us. Would we not be glad to know that he who did the deed has lived down both it and the disgrace bravely, has made an honourable place for himself among men, and has now come forward to repair the wrong?"

There was one suspended breath around him.

"If he were here, would you—could you—not even find it in your hearts to give him a frank and hearty hand of fellowship?"

"Yes! Yes! We would!" on all sides.

"Those in favour of Santa Claus unmasking at once will say 'I!'"

One tremendous and unanimous "I!" resounded.

Santa Claus stepped forward from the centre of the

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tall Christmas tree. He threw off his fantastic garments. The grotesque mask of the evening fell to his feet, carrying the white wig and beard along with it, and a man not over thirty, with a square jaw and pathetic dark eyes, which held the shadow of past suffering in them, stood bared to these questioning glances, with a mingling of shrinking sensitiveness and manly self-possession that won the hearts of the entire crowd.

Everybody swayed towards him. The older people were tracing the likeness of the brown, manly face to the boyish one they remembered before his life had suffered eclipse.

"I'm bothered if it isn't Dick Halliday himself!" was Captain Andrew's suppressed comment.

"Dick Halliday! Why, it's Dick, sure enough. Wouldn't you have known him anywhere?" sounded over the grounds.

Squire Halliday and his wife had their faces hidden.

"I thought there was something familiar about him the day he rode on the coach with me," said John Rainupp, in deep disgust at his own stupidity.

"He's a fine fellow if he has worn prison garb," was the comment of Dr. Chalifoux to Captain Andrews. "Comes of good stock, you see. Had the grit to live it down."

"Yes," assented the Captain absently. "I wish he had steered clear of the rocks in the first place," he added with his eyes on Millicent's face, now flooded with a mild radiance as of moonlight. It was plain she still loved him. If the broken engagement was to be reversed, why then——

Dick stood there silent. It was a trying ordeal, this bidding publicly for the respect and confidence of his townspeople with the taint of dishonour not yet outlived. To one of Dick's nature sin brings its own punishment. But, seconded by Mr. Melladew, he had dared all in this peculiar fashion, because he longed, let it be whispered, to be reinstated fully for the sake of Millicent, whose life he had so shamefully clouded.

The murmur in the grounds swelled to a round of heart-felt applause. What but large, generous sentiments could have been the outcome of that evening?

"My friends, I thank you," Dick began, and broke down completely.

Squire Halliday and his wife were making their way up to him. There were few dry eyes there as the father, whose proud heart had been bowed in shame over his dishonoured name, grasped Dick's outstretched hand, with a trembling, "God bless you, my son!" and the mother, whose heart had yearned over her wayward boy all these years, drew his head down upon her breast tenderly, and shed tears of joy upon his face.

"Makes me think of the night she first held him in her arms thirty years ago," said Dr. Chalifoux in a broken voice.

"Halliday ought to be proud of him," rejoined Lawyer Winthrop, whose pleading had shortened Dick's sentence. "It isn't every young fellow who can recover from a slip so thoroughly."

"No need, you see, of killing a boy for one mistake," said John Rainupp.

"No. But this seems to be a mighty fuss over a gaol-bird," rejoined Cyril Hubbard, the druggist, who had failed to win Millicent's favour in time past.

"Don't use that word again in my hearing," said John.

"Nor in mine! Nor in mine!" came from all those within earshot.

"I am master of my own tongue," retorted Cyril.

"I move we march round and give him a handshake," said Lawyer Winthrop.

Seconded and carried, and Dick, as they filed up to welcome him, wondered if it were only last night he had lain awake shrinking from imagined hisses and epithets, such as are apt to descend upon sinners of his type.

Up they came—Mr. Melladew beaming over the unanimous and hearty reception when he had feared deep-seated prejudice; the Rev. Mr. Merrivale, resting his hand on Dick's head with a hearty "Happy Christmas"; Dr. Chalifoux with a hard grip that spoke volumes. On and on they came, Billy Bowl and Ned, Maggy Maguire in her armchair, with tears on her lashes and a smile about her mouth.

Millicent, with sweet flushed face and tremulous lips, still in her cloud of drapery, letting her warm palm rest in his, frankly and tenderly even. Captain Andrews, with all reservations vanishing from his big, kindly nature, nurtured on the ocean, when he looked keen and close into Dick's half-pleading, honest eyes. The orphans, too, chocolates in their cheeks and "things" hugged under their arms—everybody, in fact, but Cyril, and really he ought to be excused, for a successful rival is a hard pill to swallow. Millicent's face had told tales.

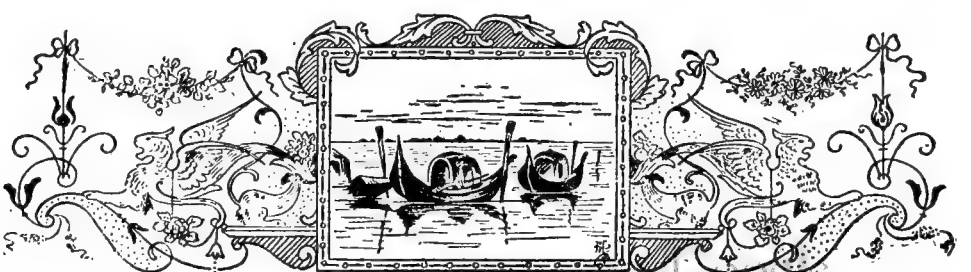
At last came a general movement to the house, where a spread awaited those who were left with an appetite.

Dick was seated between his father and mother, who were flanked by Dr. Chalifoux, Lawyer Winthrop and the rest of the "old stock," and Mr. Melladew took out letters from Dick's friends in Melbourne and passed them round, and Dick must needs recount how he worked his way out to the West coast as a hand before the mast, and struck it rich in the gold-fields after a hand-to-hand tussle, and afterwards went into business in Peel, where he now had many friends, which he did with halting speech, modestly, for this whole-hearted ignoring of a grave misdeed by all of them quite overcame him.

* * * * *

So Dick came into the confidence of his home friends on the crest of the Christmas wave.

BARRY SHARPE.



Through the Fire of the Commune

By Walter Rothwell.

"Jean, Jean, don't—don't go!"

"I must, Marie; we march for Versailles to-morrow. There, cheer up, little one, I shall soon be back. Prussians and rebels will leave Paris at rest, and when everything is quiet once more, we must be married."

"But, Jean, I am afraid. Father says Monsieur Thiers' soldiers will all be shot, and—oh, Jean—Jean——" she broke down and sobbed as if her heart would break.

The young man bit his lips to keep back his emotion.

"But see, dear," he said, as cheerfully as he could, "that is impossible. We shall soon put an end to this little riot. Be a brave girl and don't cry any more."

"And Monsieur Gruchon, Jean?"

The soldier's face fell, and the fear he had been so bravely trying to conceal, showed itself plainly.

"True, there is Gruchon," he said; and before his mind rose the wrinkled face, the horrible leer, the thick, protruding lips, of the old money-lender of the Rue des Martyrs.

It was in that street—where Marie lived with her father, Martial Buissonière—that Gruchon first saw her, six months ago. She thought, then, how strange it was that he smiled at, and made signs to her so often.

Jean was away with the army at the time, or he would soon have stopped the annoyance, for the old man had, besides, a curious way of creeping up unnoticed and whispering in her ear that alarmed her. But after all, perhaps it was only that he wished to be friendly with her, for she had never joined the other women in the street in execration and jeers when they caught sight of Gruchon. With them and with the *gamins* it was: "The old vampire—the leech—the pig of an usurer!" but Marie, who seldom said a harsh word of anyone, had never the heart to speak against the old man. She pitied him for his loneliness, his ugliness, even for his evil passions.

One evening, however, on returning from her work, she found the money-lender with her father, talking eagerly. As she entered they ceased their conversation abruptly, and Gruchon took his leave with a cunning smile and a "Good-evening, Mam'selle Buissonière."

All through the dinner her father was uneasy and embarrassed. At last, pressed by Marie, he confessed that his visitor had made a proposal for her hand.

The young girl was amazed, and then burst into a laugh.

"It is so droll!" she said. "I should not laugh at the poor man, but how can I help it? I—his wife! And give up poor Jean?" she added in a mock whimper, smiling at her father with pouting lips.

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Martial sat looking into space, his thick, heavy eyebrows drawn down.

Marie rose and put her arm caressingly round his neck.

"Come, father, don't look so stern. Is it because I laughed? Well, I will do so no more; now go on with your dinner."

But still he scowled moodily.

"Marie," he said at length, "Gruchon is rich, he has property—houses and land, my child."

"Yes, father."

"He loves you, Marie."

"Father!"

"And now, since war has been declared, work is scarce. I can barely earn enough to buy bread," continued Martial, as if to himself.

His daughter sat as if turned into stone, listening.

"He is rich, he will make you a good husband, for he loves you. Jean—if he be not dead—will never have enough to marry——"

"Stop, father," and Marie rose to her feet proudly. "I belong to Jean, we are betrothed, and we love each other,"—then her dignity broke down and she burst into tears—"and I wouldn't marry that old man if—if—he owned the Bank of France." Then she ran into her bedroom and slammed the door.

All Martial's attempts to persuade his daughter were of no avail, and Gruchon's attentions only made her hate him.

At length, Jean, with the retreating remnant of the army, returned to Paris, and for a time the old moneylender ceased to annoy her.

During the horrors of the siege Marie was almost happy. Was not Jean fighting for her? Could she not see him, almost from day to day, and assure herself that he was safe! Only during the hopeless sorties—when the French were always driven back—she felt a horrible fear lest her sweetheart should be struck down, never to re-enter the gates.

Then came the capitulation and—the First of March!

On that day the Prussians entered Paris, and, amid the confusion, the National Guard, maddened at the disgrace of surrender, seized the cannon, and carried them to the heights of Monmartre. The rabble of the city thronged round the fort thus made, and foremost amongst them were Martial Buissonière and old Gruchon, inciting the people to deeds of violence, and urging the soldiery to rebel.

Thiers attempted in vain to recapture the guns; it was the signal for the war of the Commune, and, to avoid detection, the army was ordered to Versailles.

So Jean and Marie had to part once more, and the young soldier grew anxious, almost terrified, when he thought of his sweetheart left in the insurgent city. Still, he tried to speak cheerfully and not think of what might happen. Marie's words, however, made it impossible to ignore the chief danger. "But there is Monsieur Gruchon," she said.

It was a terrible position, and, as Marie clung to him, weeping, Jean was distracted. The name the *gamins* had given the usurer—"the old vampire"—came to him in all its forcible meaning. He pictured the man watching and waiting patiently to seize his victim, as soon as her protector should have gone. He fancied he knew why Gruchon was working his way to the front rank of the Communists; if they held the city he would be a leader—a power amongst them, and Marie—how could she escape him!

The girl looked into her lover's face and saw the agony he felt. Her heart reproached her for adding to his trouble, and she wiped away her tears and kissed him.

"Never mind, Jean," she said bravely, "I know you will soon be back, and—yes, when all is peace, we will be——" she finished the sentence with a blush. "And perhaps, after all, the horrid old wretch will forget all about me. You see, it will be all right, dear, and whatever happens, I shall always—always love you."

Marie clung to him.

So Jean went away comforted a little, in spite of his forebodings.

The next day the cannon on Monmartre opened fire, answered by the battery of Mont Valérien. The second siege of Paris had commenced!

For six days the shells shrieked over the city: for six long days Marie, terrified, watched alone at her window; saw the mob of men and wild-looking women stream

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down the street in the direction of the Boulevards, and, shuddering, saw the dead and wounded carried swiftly past.

Then the rush to the front ceased, for the army of Versailles had entered Paris, and above the shouts and the cries, the young girl heard the sustained firing that told her the soldiers were storming the barricade at the head of the Rue des Martyrs.

Her heart beat with hope. Jean would soon be with her now.

Suddenly a red glare lit up the sky; the Communists were firing the houses!

Marie watched the light spread and grow as the flames ran from roof to roof, from street to street. Night came, but no darkness of night; and below, in the flare and heat, ran women, old and young, all mad, frantic—singing and yelling—hair streaming, red sashes flying, swinging cans of petroleum and blazing torches. One of the furies fell in the mad rush; her oil-saturated dress caught fire; she fled screaming down the street, a living mass of flame. It was a carnival of fiends. An incarnation of horror!

Marie could not look away from the scene, it fascinated her.

Amid the noise she did not hear the door of the room open, and she turned with a cry, as a hand was laid on her shoulder. It was Gruchon, black with powder—red with blood—more hideous than ever.

"You thought you were forgotten, my pretty one," he cried, "but no, I am here to save you. We must leave this place at once."

He went to a cupboard, and taking out one of Martial Buissonière's blouses, put it on. "The army has entered the walls," he continued, pouring water into a pail, and washing his hands and face. "You look hopeful. Gr—r—r, I know; you think of your lover. But he will be too late. I intended to leave my love-making until we were masters of the city, but that dream is over. Only when Monsieur Jean comes he will find the bird gone. Eh, my pretty, we can hide safely till the fighting is done. I know where. I have money, too. I took care to hide that from my dear comrades. Shall we not be happy, my dear?" And he threw his arms around her, and kissed her in spite of her struggles.

"So you bite, do you? You will not have it that it is a good plan? Now, see the consequences of refusing."

He dragged her to the window, and looked down upon the mad crowd.

He dragged her to the window.

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"See," he cried, his face lighting up with a devilish enthusiasm. "See the brave girls! See the noble women! They burn the city; they destroy; they kill. Bravo! bravo! *Vive la Commune! Les pétroleuses! Les pétroleuses!*"

"Heaven protect me," murmured Marie, shuddering as the wild chorus of the Marseillaise reached her ears. "Where is Jean? Where is my father?"

"Your father," growled Gruchon brutally; "in the trench of the first barricade. No fear of his interrupting our love scene. Shall I call them up—*les pétroleuses?* Would their embraces be softer than mine? Now will you forget your Jean and be my wife? Your promise," he demanded, shaking her savagely by the shoulder, "or into the street, and our she-wolves shall tear you limb from limb."

"Ah, no. Mercy! Mercy!"

"Which is it to be? Quick."

"My God! Mercy!"

"Yes, then?"

"No, a thousand times, no!" cried Marie in desperation.

Gruchon's face was distorted with rage and disappointed passion.

"Come, then," he shouted, "come; down below to the *pétroleuses*—to the girls of the torch—come!" and he dragged her to the door and flung it open. A volume of stifling smoke poured into the room, and drove them back. The *pétroleuses* had fired the house!

Loth to relinquish his prey, Gruchon caught her up in his arms to carry her through the dense clouds that rolled up the stairs, but she clung desperately to the side and posts of the door. In vain he tried to tear her away. He was suffocating.

"Curse you, you will not come?" he yelled at last. "Then stay—and burn, burn, burn!" Flinging her to the ground he slammed the door, locked it, and rushed down the already crackling stairs.

Marie rose, and staggering to the window, threw it open. "Help! help!" she cried.

At that moment, down the street, driving before them the rabble, rushed the soldiers. Jean was with them. He heard the cry, and saw Marie's face at the window. With one bound he was at the door. As he reached it, Gruchon rushed out. Jean recognised him, and, mad with rage, caught him by the throat, hurling him back amongst the soldiers as a rat is thrown to the dogs.

A yell of execration rose from the men.

"A Communist!" he cried, and disappeared in the doorway.

A dozen hands seized the denounced man.

"No, no, for God's sake! No! I have nothing to do with them; see, my hands are clean."

A soldier reached over, and catching the collar of his blouse, tore it down with a sudden jerk, showing beneath it—the red sash of the Commune!

A yell of execration rose from the men. "To the barricade," was the cry. The wretched Gruchon, coward at the last, cursing, praying, shrieking, was hurled against the barrier, and as Jean, bearing Marie in his arms, reached the street, there was a rattle of musketry, a scream—and the soldiers swept on.

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The Queen Against Owen

By Allen Upward

Author of "Secrets of the Courts of Europe," "The Prince of Balkistan," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

The Indictment.

"Mynyddshire to Wit.—The jurors for our lady the Queen upon their oath present that Eleanor Margaret Owen, upon the first day of June in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and eighty-nine, feloniously, wilfully, and of her malice aforethought did kill and murder one Ann Elizabeth Lewis against the peace of our lady the Queen, her crown and dignity."

CHAPTER II.

The Brief for the Prosecution.

"A brief for you, sir, for the assizes at Abertaff—the great murder case."

Mr. Prescott looked up as his clerk entered, and heard these words. Then he silently put out his hand and took the brief, while the clerk retired into the outer room of the chambers to make a note of the fee.

Everyone had heard of the great Porthstone murder. Mr. Prescott had followed the papers pretty closely in their accounts of it—the discovery, the proceedings at the inquest, before the magistrates, and so on. The brief did not take him altogether by surprise. He had been intrusted with several important prosecutions before this, and the solicitor representing the Crown in the present case was a personal friend of his own. He had, therefore, all along had expectations of appearing in the case, and his only doubt had been whether, on account of its unusual importance, a Queen's Counsel would be engaged along with him, or whether he would have the charge of the case himself.

It need hardly be added that Mr. Prescott was still a member of the "Junior Bar," that is to say, he had not arrived at the dignity of a Queen's Counsel. But he had been some ten years in the practice of his profession, and occupied a foremost position among the members of the Southern Circuit. Tall, thin, and auburn-haired, with a ruddy complexion, his appearance was rather remarkable among the brethren of the long robe. But he had a pattern lawyer's face, with a firm, decided chin, the pronounced nose and strongly-marked eyebrows characteristic of the race.

Before opening the document in his hand, he took a hasty glance at the outside. It bore the usual endorsement. At the head were the words "Mynyddshire Summer Assizes, *Holden at* Abertaff, 29th July, 1889."

Then followed the name of the case: "Regina, *on the Prosecution of Sergeant Evans,* against Eleanor Margaret Owen," and the description of the offence: "*For Wilful Murder.*"

Next came the word "Brief" in very large letters. "*For the Prosecution:* Mr. Chas. Prescott, 20 guineas."

And a little below, on one side: "With you, Mr. F. J. Pollard." This was a younger man, who was to act as junior to Prescott.

Last of all came the solicitors' name at the foot: "Pollard and Pollard, Abertaff." They were, as may be surmised, relations of the young gentleman who had been favoured with the junior brief.

Mr. Prescott smiled pleasantly at the number of guineas, and sardonically at the name of the counsel whose assistance he was to receive. Then, pulling off the tape, he unfolded the document, and settled down to a study of its contents.

It was headed inside by the same words as appeared in the endorsement, down to "wilful murder." After that it went on to give a copy of the indictment.

Then came the narrative itself:

"Case for the Prosecution.

"In this case the prisoner, Eleanor Margaret Owen, is charged with the wilful murder of Ann Elizabeth Lewis.

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"The facts of the case are as follows:

"The deceased, Miss Ann Lewis, was a maiden lady, living at Porthstone, in Mynyddshire, a quiet little seaside place about twenty miles from the county town, Abertaff.

"Her only surviving relative was a nephew, John Lewis, who had been for a considerable time in Australia, but, having made some money, returned to England, and arrived at Porthstone on the evening of the first of June.

"The accused, Eleanor Margaret Owen, is an orphan, her father, the late Rector of Porthstone, having died two years ago."

("Poor old Owen! I remember him well," murmured the barrister. "It's well for the poor old chap that he is gone.")

"Immediately on her father's death she went to reside with Miss Lewis, with whom her father and herself had been on friendly terms, in the capacity of a paid companion.

"She was paid £24 a year and had no other means of support; but Rebecca, a servant in the house, will say that she has heard Miss Lewis promised to remember the accused in her will.

"Deceased was rather eccentric in money matters, and invested a large portion of her savings in valuable jewels. No one ever saw the collection; but William Williams, a jeweller, of Abertaff, will swear that he supplied deceased with something like a thousand pounds' worth of jewels annually for several years past.

"It will be seen below that these jewels have entirely disappeared since the night of the murder.

"Counsel will observe that a motive is here suggested for the crime.

Mr. Prescott looked up as his clerk entered.

"On the night of the first of June last Mr. Lewis, deceased's nephew, left the house about ten o'clock and did not return that night.

"Shortly after he was gone deceased was heard to retire by the servants. These are four in number, and consist of a butler or general man, cook, housemaid, and parlourmaid.

"The three women servants went to rest at a quarter-past ten, and the butler at half-past.

"All this time prisoner was downstairs in the drawing-room, where she had spent the evening with deceased and Mr. Lewis.

"About eleven the butler thinks he heard her come upstairs to her bedroom, which adjoined deceased's, with a door of communication between. This door was never locked or bolted.

"An hour afterwards Rebecca, the parlourmaid, woke from sleep, and heard a stifled groan somewhere below. Apparently it proceeded from Miss Lewis's room. She did not waken the housemaid, who sleeps in the same room. She attributed the sound at the time to troubled sleep.

"Shortly afterwards she heard a subdued sound, as if of footsteps going downstairs. She was not alarmed, as she thought she recognised Miss Owen's tread. She, therefore, roused no one, but, inspired by curiosity, got up herself, put on some things, and crept downstairs.

"All the doors were closed as she passed. She listened outside Miss Owen's room, but heard nothing. Just then she thought she heard the front door pulled gently to. She went cautiously down, and discovered that all the bolts had been undone, and the door was fastened simply by the latch.

"Three persons carried a latch-key—Miss Lewis, the butler, and Miss Owen. One of the three had, therefore, gone out. Having ascertained this, she retired to her room."

("Now we're coming to something like evidence," remarked Mr. Prescott, as he made copious interlineations with a blue pencil. "That's the worst of Pollard, he always will write in this florid style. His brother's speeches are just the same.")

"She did not go to sleep, however. She lay awake listening for some time, and then she heard footsteps ascending and going into one of the bedrooms below. Her room was immediately above that of deceased.

"In about ten minutes more, to employ the witness's own expression, the footsteps came out again and descended to the hall for the second time. The parlourmaid now awakened the housemaid, Lucy, who slept in the room with her, and they both sat up and listened intently for some time.

"The footsteps sounded heavier this time; the witnesses describe them as 'thumpy.' Counsel will see that this would be the natural result of someone carrying a heavy load.

"This time neither of the servants made any attempt to follow or observe what was taking place. They say they heard the hall door softly pulled to, but nothing more.

"Shortly afterwards they both fell asleep.

"The same night, about twelve o'clock, a fisherman of the place, named Evan Thomas, was coming up from the beach. He had been doing some night fishing.

"As he got on to the esplanade he observed the figure of a woman walking swiftly away from him in the direction of Newton Bay. He knows prisoner well, and believes it was her he saw.

"There is no further evidence as to what occurred that night.

"In the morning the housemaid Lucy was the first down,

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as was usually the case. *She found the hall door locked and bolted, as the butler left it at half-past ten the night before.*

"One of the household, therefore, must have been out, and returned after the witness Rebecca had gone back to her room.

"Putting these facts together, it is clear that the only possible authors of the crime subsequently discovered must have been the butler, who had a latch-key, and prisoner.

"At eight o'clock the witness Rebecca came down and took two jugs of hot water to the ladies' doors. She knocked at each. She heard a faint reply from prisoner, but none from deceased's room.

"At half-past eight prisoner usually came down, and deceased was generally seen a few minutes after.

"On this morning, the second of June, neither of them had appeared by nine o'clock.

"The witness Rebecca then remembered that Miss Lewis had not answered when called, and feared that she had failed to waken her. She therefore went upstairs and knocked again.

"There was no answer. Becoming alarmed, because her mistress was old and had once suffered from some seizure, she went to Miss Owen's door and knocked impatiently.

"Prisoner at once came and opened it. She was completely dressed, and apparently ready to come down.

"The following conversation, or something near it then took place:

"The witness Rebecca began by saying that she had knocked at Miss Lewis's door, but could get no answer. 'Do you know if anything's the matter?' she said.

"Prisoner heard her without any appearance of surprise, and merely answered:

"'No; we had better call to her, and if she doesn't answer, I'll go in.'

"They then went together to the door on the landing, and prisoner called out loudly: 'Miss Lewis! May I come in?'

"There was again no answer. Prisoner then put her hand to the door and turned the handle. The door, however, would not open. It was locked, and the key was inside.

"The only possible access, therefore, was through prisoner's own room.

"It is unnecessary to draw counsel's attention to the gravity of this circumstance."

("Quite unnecessary," said Prescott sarcastically to himself. "Bless my soul, how he piles on the agony!")

"By this time, the other servants in the house had taken the alarm. The butler, John Simons, came on the scene, followed by the cook and housemaid. It was he who now addressed prisoner:

"'We must get in through your room, miss,' he said.

"It may be well to state here, that Simons had lived with the deceased for fifteen years, and was greatly trusted.

"He now went straight into prisoner's bedroom. Prisoner seemed thoroughly alarmed, and ran in after him, the three women coming next.

"As he was about to take hold of the handle of the door opening into Miss Lewis's room, he suddenly beheld a sight that made him reel back. This was a smear of blood on the china handle. The witness Rebecca caught sight of it at the same time, and uttered a loud scream.

"No one noticed the demeanour of the prisoner at the moment of this discovery. But when they had recovered sufficiently to take notice, she was leaning against a chest of drawers, deathly pale."

("Confound the man!" exclaimed the reader, as he came to this sentence. "How he does go on against her! It's enough to make me think her innocent. Poor little Eleanor! It's five years since I saw her. She was a pretty little thing of fifteen then. I wonder what sort of woman she has turned out. Well, well, I must stick to business.")

"Simons quickly recovered his presence of mind. Taking hold of the handle so as to avoid touching the smear, he burst open the door, and rushed in towards the bed.

"The bed was empty.

"It seemed to have been slept in the night before, and the clothes were not much disarranged; but on the lower sheet, close to the bolster, was a large stain of blood.

"The stain was about the size of a cheese-plate, dark in the centre, and fainter round the edge. There was no other trace of violence.

"The room was then searched. All present took part in the search except prisoner, who sat in a chair looking on.

"Deceased's clothes, worn by her the day before, were found in their proper places, negativing the idea that she could have gone away herself. Her nightdress, on the other hand, was missing. This would point to the prisoner's having killed her in her sleep and disposed of the body as it was.

"This was a smear of blood on the china handle."

"No further trace of violence was discovered in the room. The butler then got them all out, and locked both doors on the outside. He then went for the police.

"This was about half-past nine. On his way to the police-station he met Mr. Lewis, deceased's nephew. He stopped him and related the circumstances.

"Mr. Lewis was greatly upset. As soon as he was able to speak he pointed out that the only possible author of the crime was Miss Owen. He turned and accompanied Simons to the police-station.

"At the police-station they found Sergeant James Evans. To him Simons detailed the incidents already described. Mr. Lewis then stepped forward and said:

"'I charge Eleanor Owen with the murder of my aunt,

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Ann Elizabeth Lewis. I have made some money, and, please God, I'll spend every penny of it rather than my poor aunt shall remain unavenged.'"

("All this is not evidence," muttered the barrister, impatiently scoring out the paragraph with his pencil. "Why does Pollard put in things like this? Perhaps it supplies a clue, though, to his enthusiasm," added Mr. Prescott thoughtfully. "I dare say he's got this Lewis behind him, and is bleeding him pretty freely. That accounts for the figures on my brief, so I oughtn't to complain. But I wish to goodness it were anybody but old Owen's daughter! Why, I can remember kissing her when she was only six years old.")

"Sergeant Evans, who will be called as a witness, now proceeded to the house and made a thorough search. Two important facts were discovered.

"The butler had left the house by the back door, but on returning with Mr. Lewis the party entered by the front. Simons stepped forward with his latch-key to open the door, but found the latch already lifted and stuck fast in its raised position.

"This was a thing which always occurred if the latch was lifted too high. The keyhole is shaped like an inverted T, and the members of the household who carried keys were generally careful not to push them too far upward, lest this result should occur.

"Counsel will probably be inclined to see a sufficient explanation of the incident in the agitation and haste by which a criminal would naturally be overcome just after the commission of such a crime."

("Yes, I suppose so." The barrister paused for some time, knitted his brows, and tried to think the matter out. "Yes, it would be a natural result," he admitted at length, and resumed his reading.)

"The next discovery was equally important.

"Miss Lewis's bedroom window looked over the front garden. Immediately below it, under the dining-room window, was a grating over a window, which gave light to an underground scullery. This grating was surrounded by a bed of shrubs, which concealed it from the eyes of visitors.

"Sergeant Evans's first move was to proceed to the spot. He was rewarded by finding bloodstains on the grating. The nearest shrubs had been roughly handled, and some of their leaves lay scattered about.

"The inference which counsel is asked to draw is that the body—or a portion of it—was lowered down through the window, and thence carried away.

"This would evidently be much easier for a young woman like the prisoner to do than to carry it downstairs.

"Her second journey down, when she appears to have been bearing a load of some kind, may be accounted for by supposing that she returned for the jewels. These, as already stated, have disappeared.

"During deceased's lifetime she maintained great secrecy about these jewels. No one, not even the servants who had been with her longest, seems to have known anything as to their whereabouts.

"It is suggested, therefore, that they were kept by deceased in a secret hiding-place. This secret must have been disclosed to prisoner, or found out by her.

"Probably, had deceased's nephew been home longer, he would have learnt something about the matter.

"Counsel will doubtless have noticed the coincidence of the crime being committed on the very night of Mr. Lewis's return. Probably this was to anticipate any communications between aunt and nephew which might have resulted in his obtaining access to the treasure hoard."

("Coincidence, indeed! Some people might think it a d—— suspicious circumstance," said the reader. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he added: "Of course she's guilty, and it's my duty to get a conviction; but, upon my word, I never had a job to do that I liked less. It's all Pollard's fault for writing up the brief so desperately. He and his Lewis!")

"Sergeant Evans now proceeded to arrest the prisoner. When he charged her with the crime she turned pale and cried out that it was impossible. But she shed no tears, and showed but little emotion after the first surprise."

("Pooh! What difference does that make? This sort of thing depends simply on the person's character, not on whether he is guilty or not." And the blue pencil did some more scoring out.)

"The only remaining circumstance of the case is the disposal of the body.

"In the afternoon of the same day, the second of June, a visitor staying in Porthstone, named Wilfrid Meredith, was walking out to Newton Bay. Just as he rounded the corner and came into the bay he discovered on the edge of the waves a human hand.

"Although somewhat bruised and discoloured, this hand has been identified as the deceased's by her nephew and the servants.

"On the fingers were several valuable rings, which deceased constantly wore. About the identity, therefore, there can be no reasonable doubt.

"No other portion of the body has yet been found. For this reason the Treasury has declined to take up the case, which is in the nature of a private prosecution on the part of Mr. Lewis.

"*Call John Lewis.*"

At this point Mr. Prescott laid down his brief and leant back in his chair. The remainder of the document consisted of the proofs or statements of the evidence which each witness was prepared to give. Much of it would, of course, be merely a repetition of the narrative contained in the first part. It could therefore be looked at some other time.

He laid down his brief, and began to think over its contents. It was a case of circumstantial evidence, evidence which all seemed to point one way, and to fix a horrible crime upon a young girl whom he remembered as a pretty child.

Though not a native of Mynyddshire, Charles Prescott was familiar with the district. He had, in fact, been educated at a grammar school in the next county, and it was while there that he had made the acquaintance of the Owens.

His favourite schoolfellow, a boy a few years younger than himself, came from the little watering-place, and a summer seldom passed without Prescott spending some part of his holiday at his friend's home. There it was that he had seen old Owen, the parish rector, and had caught a few passing glimpses of little Eleanor.

Hence his interest in the present case, and the unusual feeling of reluctance with which he approached his task. He had not been to Porthstone for five years now. The schoolfellows were still friendly—in fact, they saw a good deal of each other still, having taken up the same profession and joined the same circuit. But Prescott had got on much better than his friend. He had had five years' start to begin with, and his was that firm, persevering temperament which insures success to the lawyer. He had, therefore, risen steadily, and was already making an income of twelve or fifteen hundred a year, while his young and erratic friend had but gained a precarious foothold in the profession by dint of a few brilliant speeches, which covered a very superficial acquaintance with the law.

"I wonder who will have the defence," meditated Prescott. "It will surely run to something more than a docker."

A docker, it should be explained, is the name for a retainer which is handed direct from a prisoner in the dock to a counsel, without the intervention of a solicitor. It is the resource of the poorer class of offenders, who can scrape together that single guinea, but no more.

"I have it. I'll go and see Tressamer about this. He goes there still, and ought to know all about it."

Tressamer was the name of his old friend. His chambers

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were in an adjoining court of the Temple. Prescott put on his hat, told his clerk where he was to be found, and strolled forth.

CHAPTER III.

Counsel for the Defence.

"Mr. Tressamer is inside, sir. Will you walk in?"

Thus said the clerk at Mr. Tressamer's chambers as soon as he saw Mr. Prescott. Then, stepping to the door, he rapped and opened it, saying the visitor's name.

"Well, Tressamer, where have you been this age?"

The speaker stopped, startled at the sight that presented itself, for there, lying on his face on the hearthrug, with his hands clutching at his thick black curls, lay George Tressamer, the very picture of one in mortal despair.

He sprang to his feet as his friend entered, and made an awkward attempt to behave as if he had not been seen.

"Why, Prescott, where do you come from, pray? More excursions to the County Court, with the solicitors on opposite sides racing to you to see which can get his brief into your hands first?"

Prescott thought it best to take the hint, and not remark on his friend's trouble. He quietly answered:

"No; I've not been anywhere. Been in town, preparing for the assizes. By-the-bye——" He paused to look for a chair, and was surprised to find everyone in the room littered with books. He proceeded to clear the nearest to him, lifting the books on to the floor. "I've just had a brief to prosecute—Hullo! 'Hawkins' Pleas of the Crown'! I had no idea you were such a student—in that Porthstone case—the murder——"

Again he stopped short. A look of anguish had come into his friend's face.

"What is it, old man? I can see something's gone wrong."

"Charlie," was the reply, spoken in a tone hardly above a whisper, "are you prosecuting Eleanor Owen?"

Prescott nodded.

"And have you read your brief?"

"I've just come from it."

"Then you can understand how I feel. I am defending her—and I love her!"

He threw all the energy of his passionate nature into the last sentence, and then sank down upon the window seat, and hid his face with his hands.

For several minutes neither spoke. Prescott hardly knew what course to take. To offer to resign his brief might be to let it pass into the hands of one who would share Mr. Pollard's prejudice against the accused. On the other hand, to retain it, unless he were prepared to bring the case fully home to the prisoner, would be alike a breach of professional honour and an act of dishonesty. He resolved at last to leave the choice to his friend.

"George," he said.

The other slowly lifted his head. Looking upon that face, his friend could see the marks of the terrible experience he was passing through. Tressamer had always been a youth of wild and stormy emotions; no man less calm and steadfast than Prescott could have maintained a friendship so long with such a nature. But now he was struggling with passions compared with which the emotions of schoolboys were as nothing.

"George, what shall I do? I want you to decide. You know me too well to think I care about the little benefit to myself when it's a case of life and death with a friend like you. Shall I chuck up the case?"

Tressamer gazed at him gratefully at first, and then with a hesitating, pondering look. Finally he said:

"You have read your brief, and, of course, you know the worst. Tell me, what do you think, honestly?"

"Honestly, George, I see no defence. There is no doubt the old woman has been murdered. I don't see how it could have been done by anyone outside the house; and then there is the blood on the door-handle. I may tell you that, even before I knew how you stood, in reading the brief I felt a sort of hesitation—that is, I couldn't get that feeling of confidence that one generally has in one's case when the evidence is clear. I felt as if I shouldn't put much heart into the prosecution. But, still, I don't see what defence there is."

Tressamer listened in silence and let a moment or two go by before he gave his decision.

"I would rather you kept your brief. I would rather you did it. After all, you have merely a mechanical part to perform—it is only routine. Suppose I were to have a limb amputated, I should like it to be done by a man I knew. And this is something of the same sort. The evidence is there, and you will not make it any worse—or better."

The other was shocked at the gloomy, resigned way in which he spoke.

"Good heavens! You don't mean that you, too, believe——"

"No, Charles; I believe she is innocent. But I do not expect her innocence will ever be proved in this world!"

"Oh, come, you mustn't give up now! All sorts of things may happen. The trial may go differently to what you expect. Half the time these witnesses don't swear up to their proofs."

"They have given their evidence twice already—at the inquest and before the magistrates."

"Yes, but then they weren't cross-examined. It is very different when they have a man like you to turn them inside out. You are not nervous about it, are you?"

"Nervous!" He smiled grimly. "No. It was at my own request I received this brief. A breach of etiquette, you see"—with another heavy smile. "If she can be saved I shall save her. Shall I tell you my defence?"

"No, don't; I would rather be taken by surprise. I don't want to shine in this case, Heaven knows! Take every advantage I can fairly give you. I know you don't expect more."

"Thank you," was the answer.

There was a little pause, during which neither spoke. At last, returning to the only topic in either mind, Tressamer observed:

"I have been deep in this ever since it occurred. I have been running up and down to Porthstone. I was at the inquest and in the police-court, but I thought it best to do nothing, and let the public think she was undefended. It may soften their feelings towards her. All these little things have to be thought of."

"Yes; don't you remember that famous Shepherdsbury case? The man who acted for the prisoner—the solicitor, I think it was—made such a brilliant fight in the police-court that the magistrates hesitated to commit; but the result was that the Crown knew all about the defence, and when the real trial came, the man hadn't a chance. Always reserve your defence."

"Yes; but you forget, the solicitor has got a splendid practice through it," was the bitter answer. "Few men in the West of England are doing better in that class of business. Did you know—but of course you didn't—that I was down at Porthstone only two days before the thing happened?"

"No; were you?"

"Yes; and I was staying in Abertaff that very night. I intended coming up to town the first thing in the morning, but something detained me, and in a few hours the news arrived. So I went down at once, saw Eleanor at the police-station, and advised her what to do before any of those meddling Pollards got at her."

"Pollards? Why, they are briefing me for the prosecution!"

"Yes, I know. Pollard conducted it in the police-court. At the inquest he represented that man Lewis, the nephew, and very bitter he was, too. But I made Eleanor choke him off before that. Wouldn't have him at any price. I

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have got a quiet old chap in Abertaff now who won't interfere—old Morgan."

"Do you know, I thought he was trying to press the case rather in my brief. This accounts for it. But what sort of a man is this Lewis?"

"Oh, a big, coarse-looking fellow. Came back from Australia just before it happened. A brute! He's egging on the Crown. She left him all her money—about twenty thousand—but the jewels are supposed to be worth nearly as much more, and he's lost them, and so he's savage."

"I say, George, I don't know that I ought to say it, but has it occurred to you as at all curious that he should have returned the very night it was done?"

A gleam of furtive joy crossed the other's face, and instantly vanished again.

"Has that struck *you*?" he said, and seemed about to add something more. But he restrained himself, and merely added: "The less you and I talk about it the better, perhaps. Coming out?"

And they left the chambers together.

But though Tressamer ceased to discuss the subject with his friend, he could not dismiss it from his mind. The sparkling wit, the wild, extravagant humour, for which he had been famous, seemed to have withered up in the furnace of his terrible grief. He lunched with Prescott in almost dead silence, and as soon as it was over got up hurriedly and disappeared.

She was sitting in a dull, stony apathy.

He had truthfully described himself as having been deep in the case from its commencement. When the news of what had happened at Porthstone reached the town of Abertaff he was walking in the High Street alone. He saw the unusual excitement, and meeting an acquaintance, learnt from him that Miss Lewis had been murdered.

"And they say it was done by her companion, a girl named Owen," added the man.

Tressamer turned white, gasped for breath, and cried out loudly:

"It's a lie! I swear she is innocent!"

In another moment he had darted off to a cab-stand, and was on his way to the station.

There he had one of those sickening waits for a train which are inevitable on such occasions. Twice he was on the point of ordering a special, but each time he restrained himself by the thought that by the time it was ready the ordinary train would be nearly due. He shunned the gloomy waiting-room, and strode up and down the narrow platform, with swift, excited strides.

The porters and newspaper-boys stared as he rushed to and fro, hardly heeding the piles of luggage with which railway servants seek to break the dull monotony of a platform promenade. There was French blood in Tressamer: short, dark, thick-necked, yet far from stout in figure, he possessed the strain of sombre passion which runs through the blood of the Celtic races. He could no more control himself in deference to the officials of Abertaff Station than a madman, when his frenzy is on him, can conceal it from his keepers.

At last the train drew up. He sprang into a carriage, and impatiently endured the journey down to the sea-side. Arrived there, he proceeded instantly to the police-station, and demanded an interview with Miss Owen.

At first there was some difficulty with the police officials, but Tressamer was not to be checked.

"I am her legal adviser," he announced. "I am a member of the Bar, and I consider it of vital importance that I should see the prisoner at once. If you refuse, I shall wire straight to the Home Office."

This threat produced its natural effect. The police, in doubt as to their powers, gave way, and he was taken into the cell where Eleanor had been secured.

If Eleanor had not wept when she was accused of the terrible crime, neither was she weeping now. She was sitting in a dull, stony apathy, from which she was hardly aroused by the sound of the barrister's familiar name. She looked up, it is true, and gazed at him with lack-lustre eyes. But she uttered no word.

He, on his part, waited till the constable had withdrawn. Then he advanced a step from the door, and said:

"Eleanor, you are innocent. Will you let me save you?"

Then at last the light came into her eyes. Then at last the unnatural stiffness faded out of her frame. Then at last the awful coldness loosed its hold of her heart, and answering, "George, I do not deserve your help," she gave way to a tempest of tears.

He waited till the storm had spent its first fury. Every shade of anguish passed across his face meanwhile. But he strove to master his feelings, and to put a commonplace expression into his voice, as he said at length:

"I have been in Abertaff the last two days—since I left you." His voice trembled an instant, but he went on: "I heard the news this morning, and came down at once. I want to defend you. I want you to accept my services as a token that you still look on me as a friend, in spite of all that has happened."

"I don't know how to answer you," she murmured. "The more generous you are, the more ashamed I feel. I ought not to take your help. And yet you are the only creature in the world who has not forsaken me."

"Don't say that, Eleanor. No one else knows you as I do. No one else feels for you—but I won't say anything about that. One stipulation I must make. You are not to thank me—not one word."

And with a stern gesture he waved her off, as she made a movement as if to throw herself at his feet.

"But you must forgive me," she said. "Whether I am as wicked as you told me I was when we parted or not, you must tell me that you take me for what I am, that you expect no change in me." She paused a moment, and then cried out with sudden vehemence: "Oh, I have done you

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injustice! I didn't know how noble you could be! But it is too late; I cannot alter now."

An angry throb convulsed the man during her first words. At the end he ground his teeth and clenched his hands together.

"Silence, Eleanor! If you speak to me like that again I shall go. There are to be no thanks, no praises. Never refer to the past. I know you and understand. If I cannot tear all hope out of my heart, what is that to you? I ask nothing, and will take nothing unless it is freely given."

He ceased, and she looked at him with a mixture of gratitude and fear.

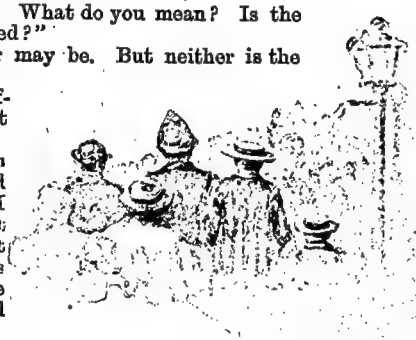
Then he referred to her dreadful situation.

"I needn't tell you, Eleanor, that as your counsel you must confide in me fully. I have heard the story so far as it is public, and up to now I may tell you that, as a matter of law, you are in no real danger."

Eleanor stared at him.

"In no danger? What do you mean? Is the murderer discovered?"

"No, and never may be. But neither is the body."



"Why, what difference does that make?"

"Don't you know?" answered the barrister. "I thought most people knew that till the body was discovered no one could be convicted of murder."

A ray of hope shone out in the prisoner's face.

"Then do you mean that Miss Lewis may be alive still?" she asked quickly.

"No, no. Nobody doubts that she is dead, or that someone has killed her. But the point is this, that you cannot be legally tried and convicted. The body has disappeared."

The heavy shade of despair settled down once more.

"What good is that?" she answered reproachfully. "If they believe me guilty it makes it worse for me, because I can never be acquitted. I shall be suspected till I die. Oh, I would rather suffer death, I think."

"Hush, hush!" he exclaimed, shocked and agitated. "Listen to me and try to bear it as best you can. The evidence against you is simply overwhelming. Probably I am the only man in the world who believes in your innocence."

"Except the murderer," she interrupted.

"Except the murderer, of course. But what I want to say is this—as things stand now no jury that ever breathed would acquit you. Only a miracle can reveal the truth. But what I can do, and mean to do, for you is to save you on the ground I have told you of. You must expect nothing more."

"George, it will kill me. Alone, hated, abhorred, what use would my life be to me when the whole world believed me guilty? No, I will pray for a miracle; but if not——" She stopped and panted in anguish of soul.

Her suffering was reflected on the man's face.

"Don't—don't talk like that!" he cried. "Remember, there will be always one who trusts you, one who reveres you, loves you! I don't mean to ask anything. I would not speak to you like this if I could help it; but remember, if the worst comes to the worst, you have always one friend to turn to, one man who asks no higher joy than to pass his life with you, whether here or in some far-off country, and devote himself to soothing your distress."

While he was unfolding these views a sudden misgiving entered Eleanor's mind. Rising up, she crossed the cell to where he sat, and, laying her hands on his shoulders, she gazed full into his eyes.

"George," she uttered in solemn tones, "I adjure you to tell me the truth. Do you really believe me innocent?"

"Before God I do!" burst out his answer as he looked her in the face.

She was satisfied, and returned to her seat.

"And now," said Tressamer, assuming a more lawyer-like tone, "tell me all that occurred that night."

A long conversation followed, of which the barrister took copious notes in his pocket-book. It was late in the afternoon when he came out of the cell, and went to secure accommodation in Porthstone for the night.

"Lost! She is lost!"

His step was slow, his head drooping, as he came along the esplanade. Suddenly he saw in front of him a concourse of people following a policeman, who held something in his hand, and a gentleman dressed in the unmistakable garb which proclaims the sea-side visitor.

As the crowd came on, Tressamer noticed that this gentleman appeared much agitated. Even the constable's face betrayed an excitement unusual among his kind. But it never occurred to the barrister that this excitement could be connected in any way with the case in which he was so deeply concerned. He took a closer glance at what the policeman was carrying, and then, to his horror, perceived that it was a human hand, the fingers still gay with precious rings. The next moment they all came up to where he was, and he heard someone in the crowd saying:

"That's the hand of the woman that was murdered. A gentleman has just found it in Newton Bay."

The fearful truth burst upon him like a thunderclap. The blood forsook his veins; he staggered helplessly to the nearest seat and sank down upon it, moaning to himself:

"Lost! She is lost!"

The firm ground on which he had been standing had crumbled all at once. The law point on which he had relied to save Eleanor's life, in spite of the crushing weight of evidence against her, was robbed by this accidental discovery of more than half its strength. Who could any longer pretend to doubt that a murder had been committed? Hence Tressamer's despair. Coupled with what Eleanor had said to him in their interview, however, it drove him to seek more earnestly than he otherwise would have done for some theory of defence upon the facts, some means whereby, if possible, to force a doubt into the

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minds of the jury, and wring from them a verdict of acquittal.

To this task he now devoted himself. He assumed the part of a detective rather than a barrister. In the case of an ordinary client conduct such as this would not have been tolerated for a moment by the rigid etiquette of the Bar; but where a case is of such a nature that the barrister is personally concerned, and where he acts as a private individual pursuing his own interests, etiquette has nothing to say. In joining the Bar, a man does not cease to be a citizen, and to enjoy the rights and privileges of ordinary mortals. It is only in his professional character that his acts come under that rigid supervision which is at once the dread and envy of inferior professions.

But, in any event, George Tressamer's present mood would not have let him give much weight to considerations of such a character. Too much was at stake. He had to keep in constant communication with Eleanor, to encourage her in face of the ordeals of the coroner and the magistrates, and to protect her from the zeal of the various graduates of the Incorporated Law Society who were thirsting to win glory in her defence.

As a blind to the public, he caused the rumour to be spread that she was without professional advice. This idea was confirmed when it got to be known that she had refused the services of Messrs. Pollard and other gentlemen of the neighbourhood.

Meanwhile Tressamer was enabled to go about with less publicity, and to pursue his inquiries. Eleanor was disposed to wonder at him for not employing a detective. But he soon explained that.

"I know detectives," he said to her. "I have seen them in the witness-box and out of it. They are admirable men in their own groove. Give them an ordinary crime—a robbery or a forgery—and they can grapple with it. They will track the defaulting cashier to America for you, or run down the absconding broker in the depths of the Australian Bush. But there their usefulness ends. They are no good in the face of a real mystery like this. This is not a question of clever detection; it is a case of reading the human heart and penetrating its motives. A genius could help us, but I know of no genius in Scotland Yard. No, I will do what I can; and if I come to anything in the way of ordinary detective work, I will send for Sergeant Wright."

So he continued to work alone. He had by this time seen and talked with every witness whose name appeared in the brief for the Crown. He had been present, with the air of a casual spectator, at the inquest, and afterwards at the inquiry before the magistrates, which ended in the committal of Eleanor to the assizes to take her trial for wilful murder.

He did not tell Eleanor much as to the results of his inquiries. He would simply mention that he had been talking to Simons, or that he had had a game of billiards with John Lewis, and she had to form her own idea of what had passed between them.

Finally, he went up to London and plunged into that minute study of Hale and Hawkins which had awakened the surprise of his friend Prescott. He was thus kept occupied till both he and his friend were summoned down from town by the approach of the assizes.

(To be continued.)

RESULT OF POST-CARD COMPETITION—No. 24.

The London guinea was awarded to Miss Johnson, 11, Park Walk, Fulham, S.W.; and the Provincial guinea to Miss M. C. Hardy, 16, Barrow Street, South Shields, Durham.

Jumbled Story Result.—No. 23.

A large number of competitors succeeded in correctly solving this story, and the £5 has gone to Miss G. Trotter, care of Mrs. Pindred, Crohill, Pendennis Road, Streatham, S.W., whose attempt came first to hand.

£1 has gone to each of the following competitors:

Mr. Eric Mayne, 49, Wellington Street, Strand, W.C.

Mr. John R. Ray, 8, Springwell Terrace, Northallerton.

Miss Mary Bramwell, care of Mrs. Meggison, 42, Blessington Road, Lee, Kent.

£2 has gone to:

Mr. M. E. Burns, care of Miss B. Kilcollun, The Mall, Sligo.

The title of the story was not in this case taken into consideration in checking the results.

KEY.

70	100	4	116	90	117	76	55	46
65	42	39	94	87	40	34	96	3
71	21	41	18	109	12	84	11	110
75	101	16	58	107	17	8	52	79
80	91	28	89	5	54	20	92	6
19	47	98	2	9	113	43	64	67
74	108	62	115	69	118	82	51	45
72	121	29	105	36	31	50	44	24
53	102	38	66	103	14	32	68	88
99	104	1	106	25	112	63	33	86
30	119	23	26	78	77	57	85	
37	111	114	48	27	81	22	10	
59	61	93	15	7	35	95	122	
60	97	13	49	73	83	56	120	

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THE GUILTY HANDS

By

DEREK VANE

Author of "The Sin and the Woman," "The Spell of Delilah," "Sentenced," etc., etc.

My own affairs have little to do with this story, so it will be sufficient to say that I am a well-known private detective, and that on May 22nd, 18—, I was seated in a first-class compartment of the express train leaving Marseilles at 10.30 a.m., due at Monte Carlo about four o'clock.

I had travelled through from London, breaking the journey only at Paris and Marseilles, at each of which places I had stayed one night. I had been sent out by the friends of a young man who had got into bad hands at that lovely little nest of wickedness on the Mediterranean to which I was bound, and though the matter was important, it was not urgent enough for there to be any necessity for me to go without my night's rest, so I had done the journey comfortably.

It was a corridor train with a dining-car attached, and being so late in the year it was half empty. No one was going South; everyone had come or was coming home as fast as they could. London and Paris were more attractive now than the Riviera. In my compartment, beside myself, there were only a young French lady and her maid, and they occupied the two corner seats on my left. I sat in a right-hand corner with my back to the engine, next to the little corridor which ran alongside of the carriages. The door of my compartment was wide open, as was the door of most others, for the day was very warm and we were glad to get as much air as we could. The window in the corridor, which faced my door, was open too, and I was looking idly out of it, for, unfortunately, I cannot read much in the train, so that I am apt to find the time drag somewhat on a railway journey unless I light upon a congenial companion. And up to the present time—about twelve o'clock—I had not exchanged a word with anyone except the conductor.

My companions—the lady and her maid—had entered the train, as I did, at Marseilles, and came into my compartment a few moments after I had taken my place. I had seen them standing on the platform at Marseilles, and had casually admired the young lady's appearance and her general attire which, while eminently suited for travelling, was at the same time very tasteful and becoming. She was a slender, fairy-like creature, with a mass of pale yellow hair coiled at the back of her little head, and her eyes, which I met once or twice when she glanced shyly at me, were clear and blue as a child's. There was a look of delicacy about her which excited my sympathy and added to her interesting appearance, and I should by no means have objected to a little conversation with so attractive a neighbour.

But, as she scarcely volunteered a remark, even to her maid, and lay back in her seat with her eyes half closed nearly the whole time, there seemed little chance of my wish being gratified. The maid was a great contrast to her mistress, being a big-boned Frenchwoman, with a dull, rather stupid face.

I had been asked by the steward whether I would go to the first or second *déjeuner* and had taken my ticket for the second, as had likewise my companions. I had watched the little crowd, who were going in to the first breakfast, hurrying past our door on their way to the dining-car, thinking that they looked as eager as though they had fasted for a week—but a meal certainly makes an agreeable diversion on a journey—and my eyes were wandering back to the window again, when I saw something that, for a moment, paralysed me with horror and surprise.

I have not mentioned that on each side of the window in the corridor was a long, narrow strip of looking-glass, and as I lay back in my corner I could just see the head of a gentleman in the adjoining compartment reflected in one of these strips. It was the head of an elderly man of stout build. I should say, for the thin hair was nearly grey, and the face was rather full and puffy. The once or twice when my eyes had wandered away from the scenery to the looking-glass, I had noticed that he seemed to be dozing most of the time, leaning back in his corner, his head reclining against the cushions.

It could not have been more than a minute after the first lot of passengers had gone past to breakfast that my eyes fell on the strip of looking-glass, and instead of my elderly neighbour reposing quietly in his corner, I

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was horrified to see his head pushed back by two hands that were pressing a white handkerchief over his mouth and nostrils. The tell-tale glass just reflected the head and hands, that was all, and I instinctively noticed that the latter were very white and shapely—delicate, nervous-looking hands they were, with unusually long fingers.

The next moment I had recovered my senses and started up with a loud exclamation. I was about to rush out to my neighbour's assistance, convinced that something was wrong, when I heard a little scream from the pretty girl in the corner.

"What is it? What has happened?" she cried, clutching my arm. "You look so dreadful. Are you ill? Why did you call out like that?" Her face reflected the scare in my own, and she was trembling violently.

I shook her off without a word, for there was no time to lose, and I should have been in the corridor the next moment, but the door was blocked by the portly person of the lady's maid, who had jumped up to see what was the matter. As I was about to push her away with scant ceremony, a man rushed past and was gone like a flash of lightning. I had just time to see that he was tall and slight and wore a black silk mask, and that was all. I called out for the conductor and hurried into the next compartment, thinking I might be most needed there.

As I entered I was met by a strong smell of chloroform, which almost overcame me for a moment, and looking round I saw that the carriage was empty with the exception of the elderly gentleman, who lay back motionless in his corner with the handkerchief still over his face. I snatched it off, and just at that moment one of the officials, who had been attracted by my cries, hurried up. Fortunately my French is pretty fluent, or I might have found myself in rather an awkward predicament.

"This gentleman has been drugged," I said. "See if there is a doctor in the train, and bring him here at once. And send someone to look for the man who did it. He rushed past just now with a black mask over his face."

The man stared at me for a moment, as though he thought I had taken leave of my senses, and certainly it seemed strange enough that such a thing should have happened almost publicly in broad daylight; but when he would have questioned me I waved him impatiently away. I did what little I could for the victim of the outrage, laying him down on the seat and loosening his collar, but he remained completely unconscious, breathing in a heavy, stertorous fashion. As I was bending over him I felt a light touch on my arm.

"What is it? Is he dead?" asked a woman's voice in a terrified whisper, and looking up, I saw my fair companion from the next carriage. The stolid figure of the maid stood a little way off in the corridor, her heavy features showing nothing more than a little curiosity and excitement, but the delicate girl at my side was trembling almost convulsively, and her face was deathly pale.

"This is no place for you," I said gently, and I added sternly to the maid: "Don't you see that your mistress is ill? Take her away at once. You ought never to have let her come."

"I couldn't stop her," the woman muttered sulkily, but she put her arm round the little trembling figure and led her gently away.

Fortunately there was a doctor among the passengers, and he made his appearance on the scene in less than five minutes. A little crowd began to gather, for, of course, by this time a rumour of something wrong had gone round the train, but he would not permit anyone to remain in the carriage but one of the officials and myself, and shutting the door he proceeded to make an examination of his patient.

"Has the villain been caught?" I asked in a low tone of the conductor.

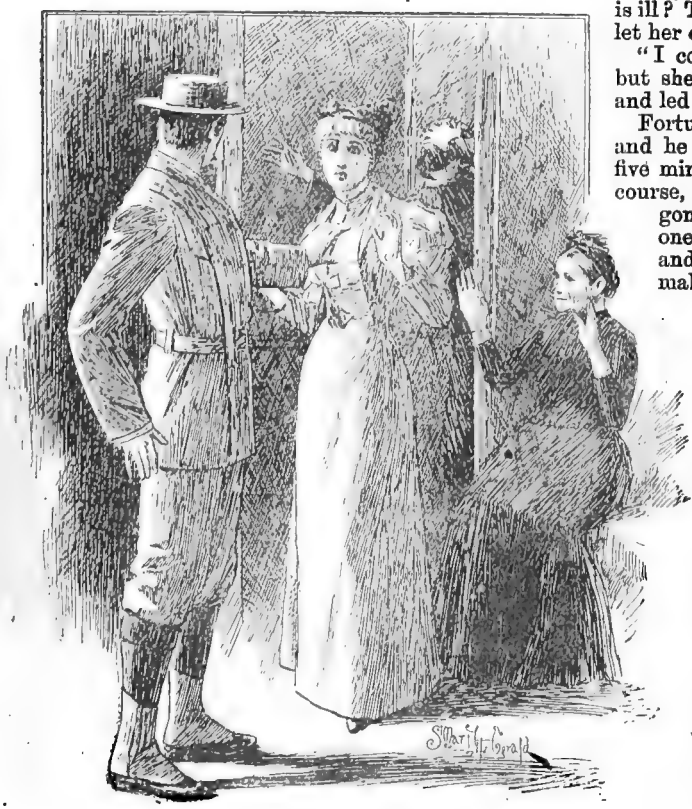
He shook his head.

"We found an overcoat lying in the corridor, but that is all. It is a mystery what can have become of the man. All the carriages have been searched, but most of the passengers were at breakfast, and nothing at all suspicious has been found. Nobody seems to have noticed anything unusual, or seen any man running away."

"But he must be close at hand," I said impatiently. "He could hardly have jumped off with the train going at express speed. You gave the alarm less than five minutes after I called out. The man's appearance must have betrayed him."

"It doesn't appear to have done so," he retorted drily. "He must be a daring scoundrel to have planned such a thing, and no doubt he had everything ready and didn't waste a moment. I dare say he is laughing in his sleeve at us all now."

"There's nothing to be done here," interrupted the doctor. "Judging from this



"What is it?" she cried.

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unfortunate gentleman's appearance, I should say he had a weak heart, and the chloroform, combined with the shock of such an attack, would have been more than sufficient to kill him. Perhaps his assailant did not mean to commit murder, but he has certainly done so."

"It does seem so dreadful."

"Why do you fancy he might not have meant it?" I asked.

He picked up a pocket-book from the seat, which had evidently been torn open and the contents rifled.

"This looks more like robbery," he said. "I expect the man who did it was after a big sum of money, and used the anæsthetic as being the simplest way of getting it quietly."

I felt annoyed—perhaps not unnaturally. Firstly, a little delay, owing to my fellow-travellers being of the excitable female sex, had prevented me from catching the criminal, as I certainly ought to have done; and, secondly, the pocket-book had escaped my own observation, and no one likes being put right in his own business.

"Was anyone in the carriage with this gentleman?" I asked the conductor.

"He has been alone for the last ten minutes, since we left Toulon. Before that there were two ladies," he replied.

"Did they know him?"

"I should say not. I did not see them exchange a word."

The compartment on the other side was empty. Altogether there seemed a complete absence of clue.

The train was stopped at the next place of importance, the station-master summoned, and put in possession of all the facts, as far as we knew them. He took charge of the dead man, and when I and the doctor, as well as my fellow-traveller and her maid (who had also seen the man rush past, but were unable to add anything to my description), had given our names and addresses, the train was allowed to go on its way. I confided my profession privately to the station-master, telling him that I should consider it a favour if he would let me know if he discovered anything bearing on the mystery, and he obligingly promised to do so. And so we started, uncomfortably conscious that most probably we carried a murderer in our midst, although there did not seem the faintest chance of our discovering him.

Various suggestions had been made, of course. Someone proposed that every passenger should be searched, and so the contents of the pocket-book might be discovered; but the suggestion was neither feasible nor likely to lead to anything could it be carried out; for supposing the thief carried the spoils on his person, who could say what had been the murdered man's property and what was his own? A few inclined to the belief that the guilty person must have dropped off the train immediately after committing the deed—such things had been done before, even from an express train—and it seemed impossible that the murderer could have preserved his composure and calmness at such a time; surely he would have done something which would have betrayed him. With my larger experience, I was not so certain of this. I had seen more than one villain look innocent and unconcerned under very trying circumstances, and once safely back in his place, this man would have little to fear. In any case, I thought that if he had sought safety by jumping off the train, he ought to be found somewhere along the line; it would be a miracle if he had escaped death in such a leap.

I was shocked to see how much the tragic occurrence had upset my fair companion. She remained some time in a half-fainting condition, and seemed to be afraid to be left alone. Her maid endeavoured to soothe her in an awkward way, but I could not but feel gratified that she seemed to turn more to me for comfort and sympathy. This terrible affair had broken down all reserve, and she talked to me freely.

"It seems so dreadful," she said with a shudder, "that the poor man should have been killed so close to us, and perhaps nothing would have been known about it for ever so long if you had not happened to look in the glass. How strange that you should have just seen the struggle! Who would have thought of such a thing?"

"Certainly not the murderer," I said, with a grim laugh. "And if I hadn't called out and startled you—and I ought to have had more self-control—he wouldn't have escaped me. But I was quite knocked over for the moment, the whole thing was so sudden and terrible."

"And there seems no chance of finding him now. How horrible to think of his being close by, perhaps!" And she looked slowly round with frightened eyes. It was evident that her nerves were quite upset.

"You mustn't think any more about it," I said firmly, "or you will make yourself quite ill. At present certainly there seems no clue. The overcoat, which he had evidently worn as a disguise, is like a hundred others, and does not even bear the maker's name. But the police may get him yet. There is often a curious fate about these things."

She shuddered again violently, and clasped her hands to her eyes. "I shall never forget that old man's face," she murmured. "I wish I could get away from it all. I can hardly sit still."

"Are you going far?" I asked sympathetically.

"To Monte Carlo. My brother is there already, and I am going to him. I have been ordered South for my health; I am not very strong." There was a pathetic drop in her voice as she said this.

"Is it not rather late for the Riviera?" I asked for want of something better to say.

"Not for me. I can stand any amount of heat," smiling faintly.

The steward came just then to say that the second *déjeuner* was served, and I got up quickly, feeling that I should be all the better for a good meal after the excitement of the last hour.

"You are coming, are you not?" I asked my companion, seeing that she did not move.

"Oh, no, I couldn't!" with a look of apprehension. "I couldn't! It would be too horrible."

"But," I said, a little surprised at such excessive sensitiveness, "I really think you ought to eat something. It would do you good. I suppose it seems a little unfeeling to sit down quietly to a meal after such an event, but it won't do the poor fellow who is dead any good our staying away. Let me persuade you."

"Oh, no, indeed, I would rather not," she said again

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with considerable agitation, and, seeing how much the idea seemed to upset her, I did not urge it any more. "My maid will bring me some wine and biscuits here. That is all I want."

I was rather surprised on our arrival at Monte Carlo not to see someone waiting to meet her at the station.

"My brother is such a dreadful gambler," she said with a faint smile, "that I dare say he has forgotten all about me. I expect he is sitting in the Casino at the present moment."

She got into a hotel omnibus with her maid, and shook hands with me on parting.

"If you are staying here any length of time, we are sure to meet again," she said. "You will go to the Rooms, like everybody else, I suppose; so I won't say good-bye, but *au revoir!*"

I walked up to the Victoria Hotel, where I intended staying, leaving my luggage to follow, and when I had removed the dust of the journey and made myself presentable, I sauntered down to the Hôtel de Paris, where the prodigal son, whom I hoped to bring to his senses, had taken up his abode.

I had never been at Monte Carlo out of the season before, and the generally deserted aspect of the place struck me strangely. The empty benches in the Casino Square; the solitary figures that mounted the steps to the famous gambling-rooms, instead of the gay crowds I had been accustomed to see, were rather depressing. I knew that the men and women who were here now were mostly either inveterate gamblers, who preferred playing in the "off" season, when they had the tables more or less to themselves, or unfortunate creatures who had lost all they had, and were either ashamed to return home or lingered on in the hope of being able to retrieve their shattered fortunes by some lucky *coup*.

A gentleman was sitting next to her.

I was fortunate enough to find the prodigal alone in his own room, and agreeably surprised to see that he was in a subdued and penitent mood, and evidently heartily sick of the place and all its belongings, though his pride would not let him acknowledge as much. However, by handling him gently and carefully, I extracted a promise from him that he would leave for England as soon as he had settled one or two things. By this I understood that he was not going to be driven home like a naughty boy, but that he would be very glad to go as soon as he had a decent excuse for doing so, particularly as I reassured him on the score of the paternal reception. It was settled before we parted that he should leave in a couple of days, but, of course, I meant to stay and see that he did, as in such cases it is not wise to run any risks.

After dinner I sauntered down to the Casino, thinking I might as well go there as any where else, and duty and inclination both leading me in the same direction, I felt that I ought to see whether my charge would keep away from the tables, as he had promised me he would, and I was also not averse to a possible meeting with my fair travelling companion. However, though I stayed until nearly closing time, I saw nothing of her, and I concluded she was probably too exhausted to leave the hotel; but I did not see my charge either, which was more satisfactory. I looked idly at the few players, who were seated at the roulette and trente-et-quarante tables, but could not make up my mind whether any one of them might be the brother who was so fond of gambling. There was no one in the least like her, and the play generally was of a very mild and unexciting description, so that I was not sorry when the evening came to an end.

I had a few lines from the station-master the next day, saying he had heard that the murdered gentleman was a native of Paris, and that he had had a large sum of money with him, intending to try his luck at the gaming tables at Monte Carlo. No money had been found, and it was therefore presumed that it had been kept in the pocket-book which the murderer had rifled.

That same night, which was to be my last in the Principality, I went into the Rooms again, and at one of the roulette tables, I saw my pretty friend. She looked up, and, meeting my glance, bowed graciously, but rather distantly, I thought; so that I did not feel encouraged to go round and speak to her, particularly as she had a pencil and card before her, and was evidently calculating the chances of the game. Perhaps I should have an opportunity later on, so I waited on the opposite side of the table just behind the croupier's chair, idly looking on.

A gentleman was sitting next to her, and presently he took up her card and made some remark, which I was too far off to hear. She nodded her head in reply, but she looked a little startled, I thought, and he put a bank-note down on the single number five and another on eight. He drew his lips in a little with that peculiar tense, almost breathless, expression of the gambler who is risking more than he can afford, and his eyes were glued to the little ivory ball as it was spun round.

The croupier gave the usual warning: "*Rien ne va plus*," as the fateful ball began to tumble about, and eventually it rolled into 5.

A pale look of excitement crossed the man's face, and, drawing a deep breath, he turned to his companion.

She smiled faintly, but seemed nervous and ill at ease. The croupier was dealing out the winnings now, and with his little rake pushed a pile of gold and notes towards the lucky player who had staked on No. 5, while greedy, envious eyes looked on from round the table.

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With an eager movement the man stretched out his hands to take the money, and for a moment they both lay, white and conspicuous, on the green cloth. I looked at them carelessly, and then in a flash something went through me. I almost gasped for breath. *Here was the perpetrator of the tragedy in the train!*

I knew it; I was convinced I had discovered the truth—as sometimes, by a sudden intuition, we do know things, though our reasons might not be always considered sufficient in a court of law. But I could swear to those hands anywhere—white and supple and blue-veined. I seemed to see them again pressing the handkerchief to the face of the helpless victim! He was about the height and figure, too, of the murderer.

"He's dead," she said.

I was still absorbed in my discovery, still watching, fascinated, those long-fingered, nervous hands as they sorted the money, when I suddenly looked up—as though someone were watching me—and found my acquaintance of the train regarding me with a fixed, suspicious gaze. Directly her eyes met mine she smiled and nodded, as though asking me to rejoice at their good fortune; but I had seen the first look, and I did not feel quite comfortable.

This woman was something quite different from what I had imagined. She had been clever enough to hoodwink me once; what was she going to do now?

I did not move, but stood quietly watching the play, as though nothing had happened. But I knew instinctively that I had put her on her guard, and that, under cover of the game, she was observing my every movement. What should I do? That was what I was trying to decide, and I could not arrive at any very satisfactory conclusion.

For me to attempt to arrest either one or the other was, of course, quite out of the question. The only thing I could do was to lay my information—which to a stranger might appear more suspicion than knowledge—before the proper authorities, and leave them to act. It was getting late now, so I thought I could saunter off to another table and so gradually make my way out without exciting suspicion

This I did, and as soon as I got outside I hurried off to make my suspicions known to the police.

They were sceptical at first, and inclined to pooh-pooh the idea (I think a little natural jealousy that a foreigner should have made such an important discovery partly accounted for this), but at length I induced them to treat the matter more seriously, and before I left they had agreed to take all necessary precautions to prevent the escape of the suspected persons.

But it was too late. The birds were already flown.

We discovered that they must have left the Casino a few minutes after I did, and, hastening back to their hotel, had taken their luggage and been driven to the station in time to catch the night mail to Paris. But they must have got out somewhere in the early morning, before a telegram could be dispatched to stop them, for nothing was seen of them at any of the stations to which information was sent, and no one knew anything about them. They had completely disappeared. They had plenty of money—I heard that they carried off about £500 from the tables that night—so that there was nothing to prevent them from making good their escape.

Of course, it was not really my business, though I felt annoyed at such a failure, and I did not forget it at once, even when I found myself back in my old quarters in London, having brought my own mission to a satisfactory conclusion.

It was six years later, when it had almost faded from my memory, that I learnt the end of the story, and was able to clear up what I had hitherto regarded as an inexplicable mystery.

I had been engaged on a little business in Soho, and my researches brought me into contact with a Frenchwoman, who led a very curious life under cover of the pleasing art of dancing. I should not have recognised her, but she recognised me. Probably I had changed less than she had. It would have been difficult in this shabby prettiness to find the dainty ethereal creature, who had been my companion on that memorable journey to Monte Carlo. It was evident that she had known hard times since then.

When we had exchanged a few remarks, I inquired after her former companion.

"He's dead," she said, "so you can't do any harm to him or to me. Do you think I should have been such a fool as to speak otherwise?"

"If that is the case," I replied, "perhaps you won't mind explaining one or two things that have always puzzled me. I should like to know how you managed that little affair at Monte Carlo?"

"Well, you're a pretty cool hand!" she said with a laugh, after glaring at me a moment. "But I don't mind obliging you: it is all the same to me now. What do you want to know?"

"Who was the murderer, and how did he manage to escape?"

"The murderer—as you politely call him—was a gentleman," she retorted insolently, "and he made the old man's acquaintance in Paris, and found out that he was going to try his luck at Monte Carlo. So, Henri—who was very short just then—thought he saw a chance of doing something for himself. He managed the old man capitally and found out all he wanted. He didn't mean to murder him; that was his own fault for being knocked over by a few whiffs of chloroform."

"And what part did you play in the performance?" I asked.

"Oh, I and the other woman were little more than spectators," she replied. "I don't think you could make

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"Who was the murderer?"

us out to be accomplices. We merely took our place in the carriage with you to get in the way, if necessary—and in that I think we succeeded," she concluded with a mocking laugh.

I felt my colour rise. I had certainly not been a match for the wiles of this Delilah.

"It was a very smart idea," she went on, still laughing. "Henri engaged himself as a waiter on the dining-car, and then, when everyone had gone in to the first breakfast, he rushed off for a moment and got the money. I had managed to let him know where the old man was, and as he was alone it was all smooth sailing. He had only to tear off his overcoat, throw the mask out of the window, and hurry back to the dining-room, and he was perfectly safe. No one thought of suspecting a waiter. If anyone had noticed his absence—which was very unlikely in the bustle of getting the breakfast ready—he would have said that he had gone into the kitchen to fetch something. You see, it was very simple."

"Very," I said drily; "and you seem to take it a good deal more coolly now than you did then."

"Oh, I have grown older and harder," she said carelessly. "I was new to such things then, and they upset me."

"It was a lucky escape for you both," I said. "What made you go off in such a hurry?"

"You!" she cried. "I saw your face change as you looked at Henri's hands in the Casino that night (he was very proud of his hands, and took a lot of trouble with them), and I knew that you had seen them before—and where? I remembered your saying you saw two hands pressing the handkerchief over the old man's face. Really, considering your profession, you were very confiding."

I bit my lip. I always had a weakness for a pretty woman, and certainly it must have made me very dull on that occasion.

"That was the last bit of luck we had, though," she continued; "we won a lot on 58—that was the old man's age, we had discovered, so it was bound to be a lucky number. Afterwards—well, afterwards we went from bad to worse, until at last I have got down to *this*," with an expressive little gesture of disgust. "But that won't interest you, though for old acquaintance sake"—with another mocking laugh—"perhaps you would like to make me a little present before you go? I have been very complaisant, you will acknowledge, and I am not proud."

I was weak enough to do as she suggested.

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Envelopes containing the attempts should be marked ***"£100 Coupon,"*** and should reach this office ***not later than the first post on Monday, January 4th, 1897.***

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SCOTTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT.

THE fortunes of the roving gold hunter had brought Scotty Collins and Dinny Flynn together in the new mining camp of Slipshod, whither they had gone on hearing of the rich pay-dirt that had been struck there.

It was only natural that they should become partners.

Scotty had once been a clog dancer in some variety troupe, while Dinny had a talent for whistling and warbling, and these accomplishments, exhibited in Slipshod's biggest saloon, "took" with the boys at once, and the two miners became exceedingly popular.

One evening, when the men had gathered in the saloon after their day's work, and in the midst of the whistling and dancing, a new-comer strolled into the place, carrying a violin case in his hand.

He watched the performance for a minute and then quietly drew his violin forth, and, leaning nonchalantly against the bar, started up a jig that forced the two partners to suddenly break off and keep time to it.

A yell of approval went up from the rough crowd when he finished, and the stranger was requested to "take something."

"Scotty," whispered Dinny, "ain't there room enough in our shanty fer that chap?"

"Plenty fer a feller that kin fiddle like that, if he wants to join us, you bet," was the reply, and, on being questioned, the stranger, who said his name was Carter, and that he had come to the camp "to look round an' try his luck," agreed to join them on being invited to do so.

The partnership proved to be a congenial one, and the trio at once became the pride of the camp, and night after night furnished amusement for the miners as well as themselves.

But winter was advancing, and when the snow fell, and the bitter winds swept down the gulch, the miners missed the "Three Pards," as they were called, for, owing to the inclement weather, they were not seen in the camp more than twice a week, their cabin being several miles away.

Since the first heavy snow, four weeks before, the partners had not been able to work their claim, and during the last three weeks that they had worked it, the results of their labours had steadily decreased, giving unpleasant evidence that the claim was giving out.

Perhaps it was thinking of this that made Dinny look so blue that afternoon, as he stared out of the little window of the cabin; either that or the dreary grey of the December sky that threatened another fall of snow before many hours.

It looked cold and forlorn enough, this mountain landscape, everything snow-covered except the blackish slabs of rock on the mountain sides, too precipitous for the snow to cling to. The countless pines, shooting out at all angles, drooped their branches lower under the mantle of white, now and then casting a little off in powdery flakes as a gust of the wintry wind made them tremble.

But the pines that fringed the summit of the hills on the other side of the gulch did not seem to stir. Perhaps it was because they were up so high—it seemed as though their tops must be scraping the clouds that were hurrying past.

It must have been bitterly cold up there, too (so thought Dinny as he meditatively eyed them). Perhaps they were too benumbed by the biting blasts to shiver.

"Scotty will get cotched in another snow if he don't get here perty soon," he remarked. "He wanted me to go 'long with him ter camp. Said he'd get me a Christmas present if I'd go—Christmas is termorry, you know. Hang Christmas. I wouldn't tramp ter Slipshod an' back in this snow fer all ther Christmas presents in creation."

No one with any liking for comfort would have wondered that Dinny preferred to remain at the cabin.

The one room was not very luxuriously furnished, but it was tight and snug.

A few skins were hung on the walls; there was one on each of the three bunks, and several were lying on the floor.

Carter, the tallest and thinnest of the partners, ("Fiddlin' Pete" the miners had already nicknamed him), was sitting cross-legged on one of the skins, puffing his pipe, while he stared hard at the fire that was blazing cheerfully in the fireplace.

Now and then he would glance up as an extra boisterous gust made the cabin shake, or whipped the cloak of snow from some unhappy pine, and threw it spitefully against the windows.

Then he would again turn to the ruddy blaze, inwardly thankful that he was warmly housed, and smoke on with renewed content.

He was in just the proper mood to appreciate Dinny's remark.

"Yer air dead right," he said slowly. "It would take a mighty big Christmas present ter get me ter camp to-day. It's mean weather, mighty mean weather, but it's allus ther way Christmas time up in these yere canyons."

"It'll be er mighty poor Christmas fer us fellers," said Dinny glumly. "I wouldn't a-give a penny, though, fer all ther weather if pay-dirt hadn't give out."

"I reckon we've squeeze her dry, that's a fact, an' there ain't nothin' ter do but prospect fer another when ther season lets us," replied Pete philosophically. "I 'spect we kin pull through ther winter."

Dinny did not answer, but stared up at the leaden sky, which must have been partially to blame for the gloomy state of his feelings.

Pete went on smoking and the room became quiet,

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except for the snapping of the fire as it tore frantically at the wood and endeavoured to escape up the broad chimney.

While Pete was eyeing the fire and Dinny aimlessly gazing at the snow-covered mountains—great pin-cushions, studded as they were with thousands of barren pines—they heard the report of firearms.

Inclosed though they were in the cabin, the clear mountain air brought the sound to them plainly.

"Must be Scotty," said Dinny. "It comes from up ther gulch. He must a sighted somethin' worth shootin' at."

As he spoke three or four more shots were heard. They were fired in rapid succession.

Dinny looked at Carter, but he seemed oblivious to everything but his pipe.

A minute passed and then half-a-dozen more shots were heard, crowding one after the other.

Carter jerked his pipe from his mouth, and his quick upward glance met Dinny's.

"Well—now—say," he began slowly (he always talked slowly), "what's all that shootin' fer? Mebbe we'd better look inter it a leetle, eh?"

There were two rifles resting on pegs on the wall. One belonged to Scotty, who seldom carried it. The other belonged to Flynn. The latter handed the gun to Pete, who took it rather awkwardly, not being used to such long weapons.

"Think we'll have a chance ter use these things?" he queried.

"Don't know. Scotty may be needin' them guns right about now, for all we know."

Each of them donned a bearskin overcoat of their own manufacture, heavy gloves and caps, and left the cabin.

The cabin was some little distance from the trail that led to Slipshod.

The snow concealed it now; but it was no trouble to know where it was, for it ran along close to the edge of a miniature precipice that rose from the side of the gulch, its edge, whipped by the winds clean of snow, and winding along, mile after mile, a black streak in a field of white, its ragged line pointing out the path.

To avoid the snow that lay deeply elsewhere, the two men kept close to the edge of this shelf of rock that followed the side of the mountain for several miles. There were places, however, where the snow lay in drifts to the very verge of the precipice. Then, again, the side of the mountain would be almost perpendicular. Where the trail led along these protecting walls it was free from snow, except for the occasional contribution of some pine that peered over the ledge above.

When sheltered by these natural snowsheds the men proceeded rapidly, for it gave them a clean path as well as shielding them from the cutting wind, and they grumbled under their frosty beards when they were forced to leave it and face the biting breeze that swept the bare mountain sides.

It was while doggedly trudging along one of these exposed spots that Carter, his head bent, suddenly ran into Denny, who had stopped.

"What's the matter?" he growled. "By hookey! B'ar tracks!"

He discovered at once what had attracted Dinny's attention. There were good-sized bear tracks leading away up the trail. A wide, deep swath in the snow showed where Bruin had come clumsily down the mountain side in a way that must have been half slide and half walk.

"Big feller, that, Pete!" shouted Dinny, for the wind was shrieking loudly through the pines. "This splains that shootin'! Scotty must a-met the cus, an' mebbe he got the wust of it. We'd better be pushin' on."

Pete fell in behind Dinny, but he now kept his head up and his eyes on the alert. The gulch was sinking further and further below them, for the ledge they were treading was now winding upward at a sharp slant. It was narrower, and was bounded by a wall of rock and dirt encroaching so close to the edge as to allow but a precarious footing.

Dinny again came to an abrupt stop.

"Lookee yere, Pete!"

He pointed to the snow that was scattered in patches along the ledge. In the snow were bear tracks coming from one direction, and the prints of boots were to be as plainly seen coming from the other way.

Here man and beast had met. And with what result? Where were they now?

"These yere tracks tell the story, Pete," said Dinny.

"But what in thunder's become of 'em?" said the other. "Neither of 'em backed water, an' they couldn't a-clumb up there," tapping the face of the cliff.

"Dunno. If Scotty, an' it must bin Scotty, had jumped over inter the gulch ter get outer the b'ar's way, the b'ar wouldn't a-follered him. They've got too much sense. A tumble off'n here would squelch a b'ar ter jelly."

"Yes, an' a man, too," said Pete, peering over into the gulch below; "or else bury him so deep in snow he'd never get out. I don't believe Scotty jumped over."

"Well, I'd do it before I'd let a b'ar get a-holt o' me, an' no gun handy. But it'd be a fool trick fer a b'ar, I swear, but it looks though he'd done that very thing."

Carter was leaning over the brink of the ledge.

He called Dinny's attention to a crevice just below the edge of the projecting rock, from which a mass of stones and earth appeared to have been recently loosened. There were also parts of the roots of a tree.

Dinny looked at it carefully.

Then he pointed straight downwards.

The side of the mountain projected outward, so they could not see much of it below them. Thirty-five or forty feet below them was another shelving slope, covered with snow.

Half imbedded in this snow, and its top suspended over the edge, a sheer fifty feet to the bottom of the gulch, was a slender pine.

"There's ther tree that grew in the crack," said Dinny. "I kin see through it now. Scotty has gone over, an' ther b'ar too, an' ther chances are they're both deader'n Mark Antony."

Pete did not inquire who that person was, but proposed that they get down into the gulch as soon as possible.

To do this it would be necessary to proceed a quarter of a mile further.

They hurried away, and when they reached a spot where they could descend, they left the trail and plunged down the hillside.

The snow was over their knees, and much deeper in the bottom of the gulch, so they kept along on the side, pushing ahead as rapidly as possible.

They were passing by a huge boulder, when they heard a warning growl.

A full-grown bear stood in their path, glaring at them angrily.

The sight of the men seemed to enrage him, for, uttering another surly growl, he advanced in a way that was unmistakably hostile.

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"Careful now, Pete. His mad is up, for he's got some lead in him already. 'Twon't do for us to make a botch of it."

But Pete knew his business; he had met these mountain lords before.

As cool as the surrounding snow, the two miners took aim at the animal and fired.

The ungainly monster stumbled in his tracks, fell, made a clumsy effort to regain his feet, then sank back in the snow and was still.

"We've done for him," remarked Pete elatedly, as they stood looking down at their trophy.

"An' mebbe he's done fer Scotty, who knows?" replied Dinny dubiously. "See here," and he pointed to spots on the animal's shaggy coat that were blood-stained, "he's bin peppered, an' if anything'll make a b'ar want to tear things up, it's ter have his hide punctured. If Scotty fell inter his paws after poppin' them holes in him, it's all up with him, poor bye."

Anxious to find their comrade, whom they were now convinced had met the bear and tried to vanquish him with his revolver—an almost useless weapon in such a case—they pressed on up the gulch, following the tracks of the bear.

They travelled on for perhaps ten minutes, during which time the tracks had maintained a tolerably straight course.

The tracks ended at a spot where the snow was hollowed out and scattered in every direction.

Down the steep side of the gulch was a deep, wide path in the snow, as though a heavy body had been dragged along. In some places the earth was laid bare.

Dinny climbed up to its starting point, and then looked straight above him.

Overhead was the shelving rock.

"Jes' as I thought," he declared. "Ther b'ar struck ther ledge up there, an' rolled off an' struck here."

"I reckon Scotty didn't foller," said Pete, "else we'd see ther hole he made in ther snow. He must a-lit on ther ledge above. Ther b'ar may have done for him just ther same, an' he may be lying dead in ther snow up thar now. How are we goin' ter git up?"

Dinny did not answer, for he was already tramping away, and Pete could do nothing but follow.

His partner led him along the side of the gulch for quite a distance, and then climbed upward to reach a point where the shelving rock ran into the hillside. Dinny helped the older man to climb upon the ledge.

Pete's long legs were quite useful now, for the snow lay deeply on the ledge, and he had no trouble in keeping behind Dinny, who was struggling through it as fast as he was able.

"Look there! Dinny," suddenly called out Pete.

Dinny turned, and saw that his companion was pointing at the great bare slab of rock, slanting outward from their right, until its keen edge was marked against the sky, showing where the trail led along, thirty or forty feet above them.

A column of smoke was leisurely crawling up the mountain side.

The two men hurried to the spot from whence it seemed to emerge—a crevice running horizontally at the base of the cliff. They could only catch glimpses of it, on account of the huge boulders that were scattered along.

Their curiosity now on edge, they advanced between the boulders and peered into the mighty crevice, a yawning crack in the mountain side, twice the height of a man.

A bright fire was burning there, sending its ruddy light dancing along the dark rock.

And there was Scotty by the fire.

But what ailed him?

He was in the midst of one of the most complicated and fantastic dances they had ever seen him perform. As though exhibiting his skill before thousands of spectators, he gyrated on one foot, swinging the other in the air as he twirled. Then he would suddenly change it to a clog, and his heavy boots thumped a lively tune as he stamped them down on the stony ground.

And all the time he kept tossing something from one hand to the other as a juggler does a ball.

He did not see his two partners staring at him in wonder.

"I know," whispered Pete, thinking he had discovered the clue to Scotty's queer behaviour; "he's dancin' ter keep warm."

Dinny looked solemn as he answered:

"I opine he ain't. He got sech a rap on ther head when he tumbled that it's knocked him clean daft."

This argument made Pete look anxious, as it seemed more reasonable than his own, for in that sheltered spot it could not have been severely cold beside the fire.

Just then Scotty turned and saw them.

"H'ray! h'ray!" he yelled wildly. "We're all right!" and at it he went again, kicking his legs right and left, and tossing that something from hand to hand.

Dinny went up and seized him by the shoulders, and thus brought the performance to a sudden stop.

"Lookee yere, ye durned fool, what ails ye?"

"Nothin'."

"How'd ye get here?"

"Hanged if I know."

"Was that you doin' that shootin' awhile ago. Was them your bullets in that b'ar?"

"Yes. Did you lay him out?"

"Why didn't you kill him while you were about it?"

Dinny spoke with assumed contempt.

"Wal, now, mebbe you think you could do any better with a thirty-two on that kind o' game. It ain't so easy. You see, I war comin' along kinder careless like, an' whistlin' as usual when I'm alone by myself, when all ter onct there war mister b'ar right in my way, as though he'd dropped right thar. You seed the place, I reckon. There wa'n't no climbin' that rock, and as fer turnin' roun' an' runnin', I knowed he'd cotch up with me in less'n no time. But there wa'n't no time ter throw away thinkin' what oughter be done—I jes' had ter do it.

"'Course I had my revolver with me, but I didn't want ter risk it on him.

"There war a pine-tree leanin' out over ther gulch, an' when ther b'ar made fer me, I jus' grabbed a-holt of it, an' clumb up it like a good feller, I tell ye—an' I got up as near ther top as I could get.

"I didn't have no idee ther fool b'ar would try ter follow me up, fer most b'ars would a-known that tree couldn't a-held up his weight. But I 'spects he must a-bin powerful hungry, fer, after a leetle scratchin', he commences ter climb up ter me.

"He kep' on a-comin' a leetle higher an' a leetle closer, an' ther tree never bent nur give 'er grunt, as far as I could see.

"'Thunder!' thinks I, 'if this keeps on he'll have a-holt o' me in less than two minutes,' an' twistin' my legs aroun' ther tree ter keep from fallin' off, I drew my gun an' commenced ter whang away at him. But, Lor' bless you, I couldn't shoot. A weather vane on a church spire wouldn't a-come in fer more wind nur cold than I

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cotched, perched out on that pine over ther gulch. It jus' began ter freeze me in double quick. There wa'n't no feelin' in my arms nur legs, an' it war all I could do to pull ther trigger, an' as fer tryin' to hit any particular part o' him, I'll jus' tell ye I wa'n't in it, fer I couldn't command my arm no more'n if it had a-bin wood, an' it's a wonder I hit him at all, big as he war.

"I knew I war cracking him, though, by ther way he growled an' scrambled up all ther faster, an' I began ter calc'late how fer I'd have ter drap, an' if ther snow down yonder war deep enough ter keep my bones from breakin'. I judge it war 'bout half er mile from where I war, but I war determined ter drap before I'd let him get near 'nough ter swipe me with that paw of his'n.

"While I was kinder ruminatin' on this, ther tree began ter move. My end war goin' down.

"Ther b'ar quit his climin', dug his claws inter ther tree an' sorter whined. I held on fer dear life. Then ther tree made a half circle sweep downwards that made me dizzy, but it wa'n't a comparison ter when she broke loose. She shot down like a streak. It took my breath away.

"I don't know how it war, but I wa'n't hurt any. If it hadn't been for them branches that I war mixed up in I 'spect some o' my bones would 'a got cracked, fer all ther snow war tol'ble deep.

"As soon as I could think of anythin' I thought o' that b'ar, but he wa'n't nowhere in sight.

"Lookin' over ther edge of ther shelf I seed mister b'ar wallerin' round in ther snow down in their gulch. He'd tumbled off ther ledge an' I didn't come far from it, lemme tell you.

"The next thing war ter get outer there, but I war most anxious ter get to a place where I could get a fire started an' kinder thaw out, fer I war about friz.

"So I looks aroun' an' spies this crack here, an' lops off some o' ther branches o' that pine an' starts a fire."

"An' so you war dancin' ter keep warm, after all?" put in Pete.

"Dancin' ter get warm?" echoed Scotty. "Not by er long shot. You'll dance, too, when I tell you. As I war stoopin' down ter light ther fire, what d'ye 'spose I found?"

"Dunno," said both of them.

"This," and Scotty held out to them that something he had been tossing from hand to hand, and which he had kept behind his back while relating his adventure.

Dinny and Pete did not dance as Scotty predicted they would, but they did swing their hats and utter exultant yells as they examined the article he had handed them.

It was a large gold nugget, liberally endowed with the metal they were all so anxious to procure.

"Scotty, you're a trump," declared Dinny. "We'll have a claim here that'll knock anythin' aroun' these diggin's, eh, Pete?"

"You bet," replied Pete decidedly. "It won't be sech a blue Christmas for us after all, will it, Dinny?"

"Christmas is all right," answered Dinny, comtemplatively examining the nugget. "An' we'll feast on b'ar meat termorry in honour o' ther day an' this chunk."

Christmas was a stormy day.

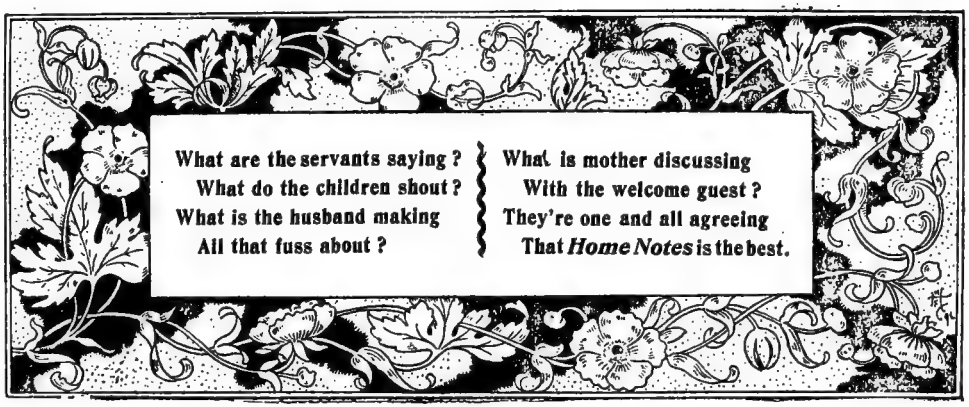
The wintry wind howled and moaned through the pines and piled snow against the little windows until the interior of the cabin was darkened, but it was one of the jolliest and brightest days the partners had ever spent, and had the miners who passed the time in playing cards in Slipshod's big saloon known that one of the "Three Pards" unique entertainments was in full blast nearly all that Christmas afternoon, with no witnesses to applaud, it is not unlikely that they would have braved the storm to a man and made a pilgrimage through the sleet and snow to the lonely little mountain cabin.

When good weather came again it began to be noised abroad that the "Three Pards" had struck one of the best paying claims around there.

"But what in thunder put 'em in their notion of locatin' a claim in such an unheerd-of place?" was the question that many of them asked, but none could answer.

"Yes, an' they've give it ther durndest name: "Ther Christmas Gift!"

CHARLES F. WELLES.


What are the servants saying?
What do the children shout?
What is the husband making
All that fuss about?
What is mother discussing
With the welcome guest?
They're one and all agreeing
That *Home Notes* is the best.

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By Madge Morris.

YOUNG John Burton would not marry. It was a great pity, for he was an eldest son with good prospects, and a present income of nearly two thousand pounds. He had a handsome face of the fair Saxon type, a well-built figure, and an easy, jovial temper. Perhaps he was not exactly a style fitted to inspire romantic maids with sentimental yearnings; but his disposition was one eminently suited for domestic wear, and his friends were apt to say of him a little regretfully: "What a capital husband he would make!"

And now he was thirty-three, and it was firmly believed that he had never entertained the least intention of matrimony, or had even been at the trouble of seeking to make himself specially agreeable to any maid, wife, or widow, in town or country. Old Burton, who was just as sweet-tempered and easy-going as his son, used to reassure his wife, and comfort himself with the contented, but somewhat vague, anticipation that "Jack would settle down some day when the right young woman turned up." For now and then the old people felt sorry to find their sixty years upon them, and no grandchildren growing up to cheer their dark days, and to brighten their son's home when they should have left it. Sitting together sometimes in the evening, while Jack was smoking a cigar on the terrace, they would discuss the matter in some such fashion as this; the old gentleman sipping his coffee complacently in the intervals of the conversation, and his wife meantime busy with her needle or knitting pins:

"John," Mrs. Burton would say softly—it was generally she who started the conversation on this particular topic—"John, my dear, don't you think it might be well if you were to point out—of course, only as a hint, you know—to our Jack the advisability of thinking about getting himself a wife?"

"It has often occurred to me to do so, Bessie, but he doesn't seem to me to care for anybody. A man should be in love before marrying, or else, according to my views, he will be miserable after."

"It is odd he doesn't fall in love," says Mrs. Burton, with a reflective air, "considering how many nice girls there are in the county. Alice Fairfax, for instance, and Constance, and that charming little Kate Harries! Kate was at the hunt-ball last Tuesday, you know, and she looked lovely. He danced with her three or four times, but his manner was just the same to her as to all the rest."

"Or there is Georgie Sandhurst, his old playmate. Jack and she used to be great friends before he went to Oxford. But she's almost always in London now, staying with her cousins."

"*That* little flirt! Oh, John, Georgie will never marry at all; she is quite as bad as Jack himself! They say she has refused ever so many offers, and means to die an old maid."

"I know she is a great flirt, and has several ardent admirers, but I doubt her having definitely refused anybody. I fancy Miss Georgie is rather the sort of young woman to engage herself three or four deep, than to say a serious 'No' to any one of her swains."

Mrs. Burton laughs.

"I shouldn't wonder," she says; "but neither you nor I would care to see Jack in the ranks of the noble army. No, Georgie is very fascinating, but she is not steady enough for our boy. She is devoted to dogs and horses, and I have heard her called 'fast.'"

"I don't know exactly what that term implies, my dear. But though Georgie is certainly daring, and perhaps giddy, I am sure she is genuine and has a good heart. You must make allowances for her; the poor child has been an orphan since her infancy, and her uncle has let her run wild. She is more like a boy than a girl; but there's no harm in her."

"Mr. Sandhurt wishes her to marry, I know; for he told me so not long ago. She is of age now, and he will leave all he has to her. But I should prefer Kate Harries or Connie, or any one else. Georgie cares for

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"I have heard her called 'fast.'"

nobody save herself and her horses, but the other girls are different. And Kate's family is excellent—old on both sides. She comes of a thoroughly good stock. Cannot Jack be induced to think about it?"

She lays her work down on her lap, and looks appealingly at her husband. Old Burton smiles, sighs, shakes his head, and at length answers with confidence:

"He'll settle down, Bessie, you may be sure, before long—when the right woman turns up, my dear; we all have to wait for that. Why doesn't he come in? It's freezing out on the terrace now. He'll be wanting a cup of coffee in a minute; is it hot still?"

One evening, after a parental discussion closely resembling the foregoing, Jack, returning to the drawing-room, announced his intention of leaving home on the morrow, for a few days' visit to an old college friend in a neighbouring county.

"You'll be back by Christmas, Jack, of course?" said Mrs. Burton. "We couldn't sit down to dinner without you."

"Of course I shall be back, mother; come home on Christmas Eve."

"Tom wants to have a carpet dance on Christmas Eve," she continued; "I didn't refuse—it is to be only small and early. You will be here in time for it?"

"Oh, yes. Who is to be asked?"

"The Jeffery girls, and Dally Forrester, and Kate. You like Kate, I think?"

"Anyone else?" said Jack, evading the question.

"The Smyths, Connie and Alice, and perhaps Georgie Sandhurst, if she is in London. Tom will ask his friends, and you can give him any names you like. We don't want more than eighteen or twenty in all. If you start to-morrow morning, it will be best to give him your list at once. He is in the library."

Jack put his empty coffee-cup on the table and went to join his younger brother.

About a week later, in the early afternoon of Christmas Eve, Jack Burton, having concluded his visit, stood on the platform of a railway station, about thirty miles from his home, awaiting the arrival of the down-train. It was a bright, frosty day; cloudless, keen, and crisp; a day to put one in high spirits and in the best of humours. But the train was late, as trains are apt to be on Christmas Eve, and when at length it panted into the little station, there proved to be but scant space left in the first-class carriages.

"There's one that doesn't seem full," cried Jack to the bewildered porter. "I'll get in there."

He opened the door hastily and sprang in. In the further corner sat a single passenger, a lady, closely enveloped in furs, and looking out of the opposite window. For a moment Jack hesitated, wavered, and would have retired had time and fate permitted.

But before his uncertainty could shape itself in word or act, a shrill whistle sounded, a voice cried: "Right!" and with a jerk and a scream the train sped onward.

"How are you, Mr. Burton?" said a brisk, silvery voice from beneath the fur in the corner.

"Why, Miss Sandhurst, fancy my getting into your compartment! No doubt you were put in here by your discreet cousin, to be kept in safety and seclusion, and I have trespassed on the preserves."

"No, you are wrong! I was put in here at Euston, with my maid to take care of me. But I turned her out at the last station we stopped at, and sent her into another carriage."

"Why did you do that?"

"If I don't tell you why, you will never guess; and if I do tell you why, you won't believe me."

Jack laughed.

"You talk conundrums, Miss Georgie, and I am far too lazy to unriddle anything so intricate. But I am very inquisitive, too."

"Well, I'll tell you. Perhaps you may help me. I turned Belinda out because I wanted to be alone; and I wanted to be alone because——"

She paused, hesitated, and slightly reddened.

"If you wanted to be alone, it follows that I must be in

"How are you, Mr. Burton?"

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the way," said her companion, feeling in his turn somewhat embarrassed.

"Oh, no!" cried she quickly. "I don't mind you—you are not like Belinda, you know. But I am making a momentous journey to-day, Mr. Burton; for between the next station and H—— I must choose a husband."

"I have had that pleasure once or twice."

"Choose—a husband! What *do* you mean?"

"Why, just this. It is four years since I 'came out,' you know, and in that time people seem to think I have flirted a great deal. Perhaps I have; but you see, it has been my misfortune to like so many fellows, and yet not to like any of them quite enough. Anyhow, uncle says I must make up my mind, and he has written to tell cousin Mary that I must really say 'Yes' to somebody, or 'No' to all; and she has been worrying me about it horribly for ever so long. And it seems that uncle has had three or four 'bids' for me, and he wrote and told me of them last week, and said that when I came home to-day I must come with a definite reply, for he couldn't stand it any longer, and people were saying I was heartless and all sorts of abominable things.

"Well, I considered and considered, but I *couldn't* make up my mind. First I thought I liked this one best, and then that, and then another; and then I began considering all over again, and each time it was worse. At last the idea struck me that if I could put them all in a row, and compare them with one another, I might arrive at a clear decision. So long as one only sees people at different times and in different places and circumstances, it's so much more difficult to judge fairly of each. Now, I can't exactly put all my candidates in a row, but I have hit on a lovely plan of seeing them all within an hour after another; and this is what I have done. I wrote to them all, and told each that I was coming down from London to-day, and particularly wished to see and to speak to him a moment on important business, and that my train would stop at such and such a station, at such and such a time, and if he would be on the platform I should be glad to say a few words to him. I appointed a different station for each—the one I thought would be within most convenient distance, according as the candidate was accustomed to ride or walk; and there are just ten minutes between each stoppage. It will be exactly like a review, a kind of 'march past' of the regiment, you know. They are to begin at the next station."

"How many applicants are there?" asked Jack, immensely amused and interested.

"Six. You see it will be all done within the hour; and then I shall collect my impressions, and make up my mind which of them I really prefer. It's no use attempting to do it any other way, because, when I try to do it mentally, I find there's so much to be said for and against each. But if I see and talk to them one after another, and am able to compare with each, I shall be sure to find out the nicest. Isn't it a grand idea?"

"It is worthy of you, Georgie; therefore, it is profoundly ingenious and wildly startling. The train is slackening speed now. Who is to be on view at the first station?"

Georgie slipped her fur hat aside, disclosing a rosy face, with full-curved lips, a "tip-tilted" nose, and a pair of merry brown eyes.

"I have written down the names in order in my pocket-book," said she, producing from a recess in the folds of her mantle the article in question.

"Tambridge Station—Cecil Vivian."

Jack was about to utter a commentary, but Georgie lifted a warning finger and he was silent in time, for the train had already stopped. She leant from the window, nodded gaily, and cried:

"Glad to see you, Mr. Vivian! I thought you would do me the kindness to come, especially as I know you ride over here so often. Think you have met Mr. Burton?"

"I have had that pleasure once or twice," said a melancholy, measured voice; and a tall man in riding gear, dark-skinned and heavily moustached, stood by the carriage, clasped Georgie's proffered hand, and bowed gravely to Jack.

"So you are returning from town, Miss Sandhurst, and I hope for some time? Do you get out here?"

"Oh, no! I go on home to H—— I wanted to see you for a moment only as I passed, and I supposed this was your nearest station. What a lovely day! Perfect for riding, isn't it?"

"Perfect. You are good enough to wish to honour me with some commission, I think?"

"Certainly," cried Georgie hurriedly. "It is about a horse; the horse Miss Dawtry wants to sell, you know—bay, with black points. I have ridden him once or twice. Could you be so kind——"

The guard blew his whistle and waved his hand warningly. "Step back, please; the train's off!"

"One moment, my good fellow," said Vivian, with an air of authority: "I wish to speak to this lady."

"Beg pardon, sir; behind time. Can't wait!"

"Oh, never mind, then!" cried Georgie energetically. "It doesn't matter in the least. Another time will do. So kind of you, Mr. Vivian! Horrid of them to be in such a hurry; see you at my uncle's instead. Good-bye."

An expression of infinite disgust, not unmixed with anger, gathered upon Vivian's dark face as Georgie drew back into her corner, and the train moved on. Surely he had provocation. To ride some twelve miles on a freezing day to keep an appointment on "business" with one's adored, and to be dismissed in this airy fashion, as though the whole meeting were the merest accident. But perhaps the experience would serve to lessen the pangs of a greater disappointment assuredly in store for him.

Jack laughed outright.

"Poor Vivian!" said he. "I fancy we have not left him so good-humoured as we found him. I really begin to think you are what the Yankees call a 'cool hand'!"

"What do you think of him?"

"I should say," answered Jack, with deliberation, watching her face closely as he spoke—"I should say

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that he will not suit. He is too melancholy for you, too ceremonious: and he has a temper, Georgie! I saw it flash out when we started. He has a 'vicious eye,' like your old chestnut, Xantippe."

Georgie opened her pocket-book demurely, and drew out her pencil:

"But, Mr. Jack," said she, "he is so very rich. Old Sir Cecil, his grandfather, has left him all his property."

"I wouldn't put wealth in the scale against happiness, if I were you, Georgie," said her companion, more earnestly.

She drew a line dividing a page of her pocket-book in the centre, and wrote at the top of one column, "Advantages;" at the top of the other, "Disadvantages." Under the first column she inscribed the words: "C. V.: Rich;" under the second: "Melancholy; vicious." Then she handed the memorandum to Jack.

"That's business-like, at all events," said he, more and more amused. "What a funny girl it is! Are you going to make similar entries on all the 'applicants'?"

"Certainly," replied she, shutting the book. "'Aids to meditation,' you know. Here's station No. 2."

"And who is here?" asked Jack, bending eagerly towards the window. "I don't see anybody, except old General Benbow."

"Well," she returned, in a low, swift whisper, "he's the man. Don't exclaim; they're all ages and sizes."

The train stopped; the General advanced with the courtly bow of an old-fashioned gentleman.

"Good-morning, Miss Georgina. How are you, Burton? I am glad to see Miss Sandhurst has so efficient an escort. We have missed her sadly of late in this part of the world."

Then, after a few kindly commonplaces: "And the 'business,' Miss Georgie?—though the pleasant anticipation of seeing you was quite business enough to bring me here."

"Good morning, Miss Georgina!"

"You are too good, General; but, the fact is, your gamekeeper has a mastiff, a beautiful dog, which my uncle admires greatly. Now, I want to give uncle a Christmas present, and, of course, I couldn't ask Gough about it before him, you know, and so I thought it would be a good idea to get you to meet me here and let me know if Gough would bring his dog over to-morrow morning after church. He wants £5 for him, I think. Now——"

"Say no more about it, Miss Georgie. Of course the mastiff is yours to do what you please with. Gough shall take him over to you by noon; but, mind, you don't owe him anything. No, no; don't be cruel, Miss Georgie. Give me this pleasure, or we shall quarrel, and that won't do at Christmas-time—peace and goodwill, you know. You haven't an idea what a delight it is to me to be of service to you, even in so small a thing. There's your train starting! Good-bye, both of you, till we meet again!"

And the General was left on the platform, smiling, and waving his hand towards the receding train.

"Well, Mr. Burton, isn't he charming?"

Georgie leaned back as she put the interrogatory, and fixed her bright eyes full on her companion's face.

"Yes; extremely charming. I have always thought the old General the best and most thoroughly kind-hearted fellow in the county, barring *my* superior officer, of course."

Georgie seized her pencil.

"But," continued Jack, "although he would make you an excellent papa-in-law, the pity is he has no son to make you a husband."

"What do you mean?"

"That girls of twenty should not mate with old boys of sixty. No, Miss Georgie, he is not to be thought of in the particular capacity under consideration. Think of the infirmities to which, in about ten years' time, he will, in the natural course of things, be subject! You will then be in the prime of your womanhood and will need, not a patient to mind, but a protector to mind you. He is too old by half: and it is his only fault, but it is decisive against him."

She was silent an instant, and a regretful expression lifted the corners of her eyebrows, and depressed her lips. Then she made a short entry: "General B: Perfect temper. Too old for the work."

"The next candidate," she said, consulting her list, "is Mr. Piggott-Crawford."

"What! The Rector of Burnitt! You can never think in sober earnest of becoming a parson's wife?"

"No, frankly. I don't think it would suit; but still I thought I would trot him out, as he seems to have gone in seriously for me. I suppose he thinks *I* should suit *him*, or he wouldn't have done it."

"I am curious to know what 'business' you can have invented as the occasion of a rendezvous with him. Not a horse or a dog, I should fancy?"

"Of course not, you goose; but hothouse flowers for his church decorations to-morrow. I told him in my note that if he would be at the station as I passed, and let me know whether they would be acceptable, I would send Robert over on a pony to the Rectory this evening, with a basketful of camelias and white roses for the altar. Hush, we are stopping, and there he is!"

The interview with the Rector of Burnitt was but a brief one; for no passenger alighted, and the train remained stationary only long enough to allow Georgie's reverend suitor time for an acknowledgment of her offer, and eager acceptance of it.

"So thoughtful of you, my dear Miss Sandhurst. I only wish you could come over to the early celebration to-morrow, and see how beautiful the altar will look; but, of course, you will be assisting at your parish church. To-night we have a midnight service, you know. I love the sweet old Catholic custom; don't you? Good-bye, and God bless you!"

Then, without consulting Jack, Georgie wrote on the recording page:

"P.C.—No advantages. Much too slow a goer."

"That disposes of No. 3," said she.

"And who is No. 4?"

"You will never guess."

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"I should never have guessed the last two candidates. But you seem to compel all hearts alike, old and young, grave and gay. We have had the Army and the Church; perhaps the next applicant will represent the profession of medicine, or of law?"

"So thoughtful of you, my dear Miss Sandhurst."

"No; he is 'a scion of a noble house,' as the sixpenny novelists say. Unless he plays me false, you are about to behold the lofty and aristocratic lineaments of a British peer of the realm."

"Oh, now I know your man! It is Lord Pinkerville! Well, that is no surprise at all. Everybody in the county settled the match between you ten or twelve months ago."

Georgie tossed her head and pouted.

"Everybody had better mind their own business," said she ungrammatically, but with severe emphasis. "I only put him down in the list because he happened to be one of the lot, and must be taken in order. But he is quite too dreadfully odious!"

"And why?"

"He hasn't an idea in his head. At least, I am forced to that conclusion; for he is one of those men who think it necessary when talking to a woman to avoid mentioning anything of interest, public or private. Therefore, as I have no means of knowing whether he ever thinks at all on any other subjects than lawn tennis and the last new waltz, he is no more to me than a mere talking doll in masculine attire."

"You are strong-minded, then, Miss Georgie?"

"I fear not; for, you know, that word is anything but a reproach. Surely it ought rather to be a reproach to be thought weak-minded. I like a woman who dares to think her own thoughts, and to do her own deeds, and to be a person, instead of a thing! I wish to be a person, and I should like my husband to be one too."

Jack became more interested than ever in this quaint little girl and her naïve, ingenuous speeches.

"Yet," said he, "they say you prefer horses to persons, and all animals generally, to the male biped of your own kind?"

"Yes," she answered, a touch of pathos in her clear tones; "I think it is a true bill. Someone once said in reply to a similar charge: 'The more I know of men, the more I admire dogs.' Well, that is a little *my* feeling. Horses and dogs are genuine, they never forget a friend; and if you love them, and show it, they will love you back without reserve, with entire trust, and for yourself alone.

"You may tell all your heart to your horse or your dog whenever you are in trouble, or grieved or indignant about anything, and he will understand and sympathise with you, and tenderly comfort you, and never betray you. Ah, I have told my horse Nestor lots of things nobody else knows, time after time!"

She checked herself abruptly, sighed a little, then laughed, and lowered the window.

"Look, there's the noble Viscount; and see—what a beautiful bouquet he has! That's for me, of course. I wonder what the guard thinks of my holding a *levée* like this at every station?"

"Charming weather, Miss Sandhurst, but confoundedly cold! Let me wish you all the compliments of the festive season. Train seems very full to-night. Thought you were at X——, Mr. Burton. Chaperoning Miss Sandhurst, I see. Congratulate you on your good fortune. Will you allow me to leave you a few flowers, Miss Sandhurst? I know you like flowers—remember you are a great admirer of roses—heard you say so once or twice. Going to be a hard frost to-night, I fancy. *Not* many balls on in town now, I suppose?"

"Not many. But we shall have a good deal of dancing down here for the next month or two, you know. I dare say I may get a waltz or so to-night."

"Really? After your journey? You are indefatigable! By-the-way—see the guard going to hold up his hand?—mustn't forget to ask what it is I can have the pleasure of doing for you; think you wanted to see me for something or other?"

"I'm afraid it was only the gratification of having a chat with you, Lord Pinkerville, and of receiving these lovely flowers;" and burying her pert little nose in the bouquet, Georgie smiled mischievously at her interrogator.

"Upon my word, Miss Sandhurst, you are too overwhelming, too complimentary, you know, I mean. It is unspeakably delightful to find oneself so flatteringly appreciated—above all, by your too charming self! Well, good-bye, *au revoir*."

"How can you say such things, Miss Georgie!" cried Jack, as they glided onward; "and to a man whom you pretend you don't like?"

"That's just exactly why," she retorted recklessly. "If I cared for him the least bit, of course, I should behave as if I didn't."

"But why, in heaven's name?"

"Because all girls do," said Georgie, with conviction. "It's a way we have." Upon which Jack mused awhile in silence. Presently he said:

"There's only one more station, I think?"

"And two more deputations," answered she. "I was obliged to give them both the same place of rendezvous. They are Fred Forrester, and his cousin, Harry Fielding."

"And they have both 'applied,' as you call it, to Mr. Sandhurst?"

"Not at all. They both 'applied' to me personally, but at different times. And I told both of them the same thing—that I couldn't make up my mind just then. And they both said they'd wait till I did."

"I know you like flowers."

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"How nice of them! And do they know why you have asked them to meet you this evening?"

"I said I had a parcel to leave on my way for Dolly Forrester; and if they would walk down to the station to meet this train I would give it to them. Here's the parcel; it's a little moonstone locket for Dolly." And she opened a small travelling bag, and produced from thence a little packet tied up with a blue ribbon, and inscribed: "With best Christmas wishes to dear Dolly."

"For invention of detail, if not for boldness of design, Miss Georgie, you beat every diplomatic artist it has ever been my fortune to hear of."

"That is a far more handsome compliment than you have paid me yet. But now, pray observe, and lend me your 'most considered counsels,' for these are the two likeliest applicants for the vacancy. Why, there's Fred alone! Where's Harry? I don't see Harry."

"May there not have been 'pistols for two, and coffee for one' ordered on receipt of your double-barrelled invitation? People who play such dangerous games as yours must expect tragic *dénouements* now and then, you know."

"What a nuisance!" she exclaimed peevishly. "Now that puts me all out of my reckoning. And it's just Harry I like best of all!"

"Ye s'ould ha'e told him that before!" said Jack aggravatingly. "'"Twas ever thus from childhood's hour!'"

"*Do* be quiet!" cried Georgie, quite fiercely, and putting her head out of the window as the train entered the station. "Why, Fred!" she exclaimed, with but scant ceremony. "Where's Harry?"

"A Merry Christmas, Georgie! It's getting quite dark. I should never have found you if you hadn't hailed me."

"A Merry Christmas to you, too, Fred. Here is Mr. Burton going home with me. And here's my Christmas present for Dolly. I know she wanted a moonstone locket, so I got her one. My love and best wishes with it. But I thought Harry would have been here, too."

"Ah, Georgie, I see you don't get the latest telegrams from this populous locality. That locket of yours will contain somebody's photograph before it hath been twenty-four hours in my fair sister's possession, else I am content 'to be writ down an ass.'"

"What! Dolly—your cousin Harry!"

"Precisely. The state of the case could not have been more correctly or more succinctly put. My sister Dolly has pledged herself to become the property of Cousin Harry on the shortest notice, consistent with the convenience of certain dressmaking and confectionery establishments; and he charged me to say all that was amiable to you on his behalf, and to tell you that Dolly particularly wished him to stay with her this evening to help in the decorations of the room, and he had to obey orders."

For a moment Georgie's self-possession seemed hardly equal to the emergency. Jack's eye was on her, and she knew it, and flushed from throat to brow. Then, with a visible effort, and lips whose trembling betrayed her emotion, or perhaps her annoyance only:

"Why, this," cried she, "is indeed a surprise! Unless you are joking, Fred?"

"Not a particle of joke in the matter, Georgie; it's a real genuine sale of *bonâ-fide* articles. But, as you sapiently observe, it *is* a surprise, and one of very recent date. The engagement was only announced to *me* yesterday, and the world—that is to say, the county—will probably not be informed of it until after Christmas week. So don't go and let it out prematurely; for Dolly and her young man are deuced shy, and they want to get all the snap-dragon and plum pudding over before starting the case in public. Well, you're off, I see; shall I meet you to-night?—carpet-dance at your place, Burton—and Tom's asked me. Dolly and Harry will come, too; but mind, Georgie, and you, too, old fellow, mum's the word. Ta-ta till nine o'clock."

"What a nuisance!" she exclaimed peevishly.

And again the train sped on, and the last of Georgie's "candidates" was lost in the fast gathering gloom of the winter twilight. She leant back in her seat, silent, and doubtless piqued. Was it *only* pique, Jack wondered, or had she really cared for the recalcitrant Harry? She was candid; it would not, he thought, be difficult to get at the truth. Better to break the pause bravely.

"It's very remiss of me, Miss Georgie, but I have actually quite forgotten to ask the question Fred put to you just now, and which, by-the-way, you did not answer: *Are* you coming to our dance to-night?"

"Certainly. Didn't I tell Lord Pinkerville that this very evening I should make use of his nosegay?"

"Come," thought Jack, "if she can dance, she's not so very hard hit."

"And," continued Georgie, with considerable warmth, "I wouldn't miss going *now* on any account, just to let Mr. Harry know that I have heard of his engagement, and that I don't care a pin!"

"Of course, that's the proper and amiable spirit to show," returned Jack approvingly. "But you see the trampled worm *will* turn occasionally."

"You are odious, with your quotations and proverbs and morals!" cried she with vehemence. "It's not more than a month since Harry spoke to me last, and begged for an answer. And I said—well, I don't quite remember what, but it was much the same as I had said before, and he ought, at least, to have waited till I set him free."

"But he was never bound!" expostulated Jack with some reason.

"Well, I don't care. I dare say I should have refused him, after all; and I hope Dolly and he will be happy. But he was certainly the nicest in the catalogue. Fred's no good, and I hate all the rest; and I get out at the next station. How dark it is, and so awfully cold, too!"

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Jack handed Georgie forth.

Jack leant forward and closed the window, which had remained lowered since they left the last station. As he re-seated himself, a gleam of light from a roadside lamp flashed upon Georgie's face, and he saw her brown eyes were fixed steadfastly on him.

"Georgie, do you remember building sand houses, down by the brook at Longdorne, with me when we were children? You were a flirt even then, and I used to suffer terrible pangs of jealousy in consequence of the way in which you *would* carry on with young Hawthorne."

"Yes, Jack; and you and he had a fight about it in the long meadow, and I looked on; and we all had cake and damson wine together, afterwards, under the big elm. Oh, I remember it perfectly, and lots of things besides. Are you ever jealous of me now, Jack?"

"Little brazen jade!" thought Jack. "What girl in the world, save Georgie, would dare ask a man such a question as that, under the circumstances?"

But he answered aloud:

"I have no right to be jealous now; and besides, are you not about to dismiss all your admirers?"

"Yes. I shall live and die an old maid. Old maids are often much happier than wives. I shall build a model hospital for poor women, and appoint women physicians to attend them, and institute an Order of Mercy for the better protection of animals, and do lots of things I am always thinking about and longing to do, and to see done. And it will be better far to make the world happier and more human, than to marry some stupid man, and do and be what every ordinary housekeeping, stocking-darning, married woman does, and is all the world over."

"If you married the right man, Georgie, he would take an interest in such things as those you name, and would help you."

"But I don't know any man who would interest himself in these things. Certainly, none of those we have seen to-day; except, perhaps, the old General—for my sake, you know. But we thought him *too* old. And there are no more candidates."

"The sixth candidate *has* come, Georgie, and is travelling with you. It is your old chum, Jack Burton. Are you going to break my heart now as you did in the old days? Are you determined to wear the white flower all your life?"

* * * * *

Lights multitudinous gleamed from the windows and poured through the open door of Longdorne Grange. Carriages followed one another in quick succession up the avenue leading to the house, and group after group of youthful figures flitted through the entrance, and clustered about it with laughter and jest, and merry greeting.

A carriage rolled to the door and stopped. Then, pausing only to bestow a nod of familiar recognition on the garrulous spectators, Jack handed Georgie forth, resplendent in white silk and Christmas roses.

"So glad to see you, Georgie!" "What a lovely bouquet!" "How did you come to meet Jack?" "Picked him up on the way?" "Come into the tea-room." "Lovely moonlight night, isn't it?" cried all the voices in Dutch chorus.

"Jack," said Mrs. Burton, appearing at the tea-room door, "how late you are. We feared you must have missed the train. You'll have no time to dress before snapdragon. Why, you *are* dressed!" she cried, as her son uncoated himself and appeared in evening garb.

"It was my fault, dear Mrs. Burton," exclaimed Georgie, pressing through the group at the doorway, and embracing the old lady. "He stopped to take care of *me*. I came down by the same train, in the same carriage; and so we went home together and saw uncle, and Jack changed his things while I dressed, and we came here in the brougham together."

Something in Georgie's eyes—a light unaccustomed, deeper and softer perhaps than hitherto—arrests the mother's attention.

"Together!" she repeats doubtfully. "You came together? Jack," turning to her son, "Jack, my dear boy——"

But she stops abruptly, and asks no more, for she sees written on her son's face the announcement for which she has so long waited in vain.

"Mother," he says, taking the girl's hand in his, "I see you have guessed the news already—Georgie has promised to be my wife."

And Mrs. Burton, pleased and proud because Jack is happy, takes the little flirt to her heart, and kisses her cordially, without a regretful thought for sober Kate Harries.

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PRIZE IDEA STORY.

FARMER HAYSEED'S DILEMMA.

LOOK ON PAGE 858.

OLD GEORGE hadn't much book learning, that's a fact; but what a heap he did know about potatoes—much more than any three other men in the county, I dare swear. 'Taters was George's pet hobby. It was 'taters, 'taters, 'taters, always 'taters, indoors and out. Even now he was sitting out in his patch of garden peeling potatoes for the stew, and he was happy.

Well, there was just two more to do, and old George was feeling round for them at the bottom of the pail, when he stopped suddenly.

"It 'ud be a good idea," said old George, and he took the bits of adhering peel from the knife with a finger and thumb, dried it by rubbing both sides across his corduroy trousers, pushed his stool away just a bit, and proceeded to go indoors.

But he hadn't got as far as the door when he stopped, turned pale, and scratched his head.

"Well, I never!" said old George; "hanged if I haven't come away without my idea!"

So back he went, turning out his pockets on the way, and felt in the pail for his idea. But it wasn't there. It wasn't *under* the pail, either, and it wasn't in the grass anywhere about, because he spent quite half-an-hour looking for it.

Then old George said: "Some'un's stolen it."

And someone must have stolen it (for old George was quite sure he had an idea half-an-hour ago, and hadn't got it now), unless a crow had flown away with it. But that never struck old George—at least, it didn't *that* day.

Well, he couldn't spend for ever and for ever looking just about for it, could he, so off he toddled home, and he said to his wife Sarah: "Sarah, I've lost my idea."

"No," said Sarah amazed, "have you though? Where did you lose it, George?"

"I dunno," said old George, "or I'd go and find it," and he laughed, and Sarah laughed too presently when she saw through it, for it was a smart thing to say—at least it was a smart thing for old George to say. "It must be found too," said old George, "for it was quite a good idea." So old George turned out the cupboards, and he turned in the window shutters, and he turned up the carpet, but no, his idea was not to be found.

Old George thought he'd got it one time though. "Dunno," said old George, "but what it might ha' slipped through that hole in my pocket into my stockings." But when he came to look into his stockings there was a hole in each of them, and it wasn't in either of his boots. Nothing could work out of *those* boots.

Well, old George went on looking for his idea for quite a long while. It was quite a good idea, you remember, and worth looking for, and he got thin and irritable looking for it and not finding it. So one night, about nine o'clock, while he was lying in bed thinking whatever he could have done with it (for, as you know, they go to bed very early in the country), he dug his elbow into his wife's ribs and woke her up with a start, and made her put her head under the sheet and scream thinking, most likely, it was thieves, and he said: "Sarah, shouldn't wonder if someone hasn't taken that idea of mine up to Lunnon. It was the best idea in the world, you know, and they take all the best things up there for the rich folk to buy."

Well, nothing would do old George but that he must get up and dress there and then and go right off to London by the next train. It was about half-past eight in the morning when he got there, and an hour later he found himself on Waterloo Bridge. Everybody seemed to be going the one way, and old George could not help but notice that quite a number of men were carrying little bags in their hands.

"I'll be bound," said old George, "my idea's in one of those bags!" The more he thought of it the more likely it seemed, and at last he went up to a gentleman who was carrying a big and heavy bag, and he said, did old George: "'Scuse me, mister, but might you have my idea in that there bag?" And the gentleman stopped and said to old George: "Get your hair cut."

And old George said to himself: "Well, it's not half a bad idea, but it's not my idea."

However, he didn't ask any more people what they had in their bags, but he walked into the Strand and found that they'd got the road up. Then old George turned pale, and he said: "I always did hear tell these Londoners were smarties," and he went up to the first workman he came to and said: "I say, mister, might they be looking for my idea?"

And what the man said it isn't nice to repeat. It was rude, very rude, and it made old George blush crimson—and, mind you, outdoor life had made old George pretty crimson as it was. So he turned and left the rude man as quickly as he could, until presently, as he walked along, he saw a policeman standing in the middle of the road with his right arm stuck out, and all the cabs and 'buses standing still behind him.

Old George had a good look at him, and he noticed that his coat-tails bulged out, and then he suddenly remembered that down in the parts where he came from policemen were called "guardians of the peace," but *his* policemen never had such power as this policeman seemed to have, and guardian, of course, meant keeper. Why, there couldn't be any doubt about it—there was old George's idea bulging out of the policeman's pocket.

Well, old George meant to have his idea. So what did he do but steal round to the rear of the policeman and put his hand into his pocket—the policeman's pocket of course. Old George didn't know quite what happened next. Indeed, old George wasn't quite sure about anything until the next morning, when he found himself in the court-house and the policeman saying something about the "execution of his duty." Old George thought it was all up with old George then, and felt the rope round his neck, but the magistrate only gave him 30 days.

When old George came out he gave up his idea as lost for ever, and took the first train home. It was a terribly hot day; the road was long and dusty, and old George was quite worn out when he got to his house. But, lo! and behold, there was his idea lying upon the doorstep. In a frenzy of delight he stooped and picked it up, dusted it carefully, and carried it indoors.

"Sarah," said old George, "I've found my idea."

"No," said Sarah; "have you though?"

"Yes," said old George, "and it's quite the best idea in the world, as I said it was."

"Well," said Sarah, "what is it?"

"Why," said old George, beaming all over, "it's——"

[What was this great idea? £10 is offered to the person who correctly names it. See page 858.]

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A Ten-Pound Note,

Eighty-Four Books,

AND Twelve Handsome Bags.

ARE OFFERED AS PRIZES UNDER THE FOLLOWING SIMPLE CONDITIONS. . .

A Ten-Pound Note.

1 On page 857 will be found a story entitled, "Farmer Hayseed's Dilemma." In the early part of the narrative the farmer has an idea, which suddenly goes out of his head. What was that idea? Ten pounds will go to the first person who sends in the correct answer.

* * * * * *

2 Twelve copies of F. Frankfort Moore's collection of short stories, "The Impudent Comedian," will be given to the twelve persons who draw the most humourous sketches of an elephant, using only straight lines. *Post-cards only.*

* * * * * *

3 Twelve copies of "Footlight Favourites" will be given to the twelve persons who make up the cleverest composite picture of all or any of the illustrations appearing in the Christmas Double Number of ***Short Stories.***

* * * * * *

4 Twelve copies of Vol. I. of ***Pearson's Magazine*** will be given to the twelve persons who send us the oldest coin. These coins will be afterwards sold for the benefit of next year's Fresh Air Fund.

* * * * * *

5 Twelve copies of Miss Winifred Graham's book, "When the Birds Begin to Sing," will be given to the first twelve ladies who correctly solve the following problem (*open to Ladies only*): At a review which took place some time since, a body of soldiers, forming a solid mass, were drawn up, and exactly filled a space bounded by a tree at each corner. A question arose between two gentlemen as to the number of men contained in the space, which measured forty yards in length by twenty in width, and it was agreed to allow two feet square as occupied by each soldier. By this reckoning, how many soldiers were there?

6 Twelve handsome bags will be given to the twelve children under fourteen who send us the most interesting scrap-book made up of Christmas and New Year's cards. The books of the prize-winners will be given to some hospital. The others will be returned, if stamps are inclosed for that purpose. The bags are worth 10s. 6d. each, and each contains half-a-sovereign.

* * * * * *

7 Twelve copies of "Guilty Gold" will be given to the twelve persons who make the cleverest anagram on the words "Guilty Gold by Headon Hill."

* * * * * *

8 Twelve copies of "Valdar the Oft-born" will be given to the twelve persons who make the cleverest anagram on the words "Valdar the Oft-born by George Griffith."

* * * * * *

9 Twelve copies of "The Final War" (by Louis Tracy) will be given to the first twelve persons who correctly solve the following problem: Two sportsmen, whose ages together do not amount to thirty years, after a day's successful shooting, counting the pheasants and partridges they have killed, Tom finds that altogether there are ten more than seven times the number of his own age, and George that there are ten times his age and eight over; also that the proportion of partridges to pheasants is as Tom's age to George's. Find the boys' ages, and the number of pheasants and partridges they bagged.

* * * * * *

All the Competitions close on January 4th, 1897.

* * * * * *

Persons may enter for any number of competitions for which they are qualified. Each attempt must bear the name and address of the sender and must be put in a separate envelope, marked on the outside with the Number of the competition. The paragraph announcing the particular competition must in each case be cut out and pasted on the attempt.

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Or, THE ROMANCE OF A LOST CONTINENT.

By GEO. C. WALLIS, Author of "*The Winning of Gunhild*," etc.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Graven Shaft.

Marenso sat thoughtfully silent awhile, watching the fire-flies that began to gather in the gloom, whilst I covered little Alcis—who had fallen asleep, tired out with youthful frolics—with a corner of my cloak and held him tenderly on my knee. The servant, Arac, was reclining on the ground half-a-dozen paces off, having crept closer to us that he might hear the Sleeper's tale. Presently the latter went on:

"I was thirty and three years old when the war came to an end, and in the seven years that followed, as I told thy Queen, no enemy dared lift his hand against Monteza's crown. Wealth and honour were mine in plenty, and I had all things I desired, save one. That one thing I lacked was a mate to love and by whom to be loved; a fair companion to share my fame, to grace my table, to sweeten my resting hours.

"In the fourth of the seven years of peace I thought I had found my wish, for one of the ladies of the palace, Leolin by name, so enthralled me by her beauty and her grace, that I fell an easy and willing victim to her charms, and asked her to become my wife. It was no light honour, and I could see that she was not disinclined to become my bride, but the King, also, had cast eyes of longing upon her and she was not proof against the great temptation. Monteza was then wifeless, and so great was his ardour that he offered her the Queen's seat. She took it, and they two ruled over me—the master whom I had served so well, and the fair one whom I loved to my own sorrow.

"In time, however, Leolin grew tired of her royal husband, and his attentions palled on her, in which plight she turned to me for companionship and comfort—to me whom she had cast over as a useless toy before. For a time our friendship was but friendship; for I struggled hard against the yoke I saw impending, but in the end our relations could no longer be called friendship. Her hatefulness of the King's company, and my love for her, broke down all the barriers that discretion, pride, and vengeance should have reared between us for ever, and so, we loved in secret. I need say no more to you, King Arnon."

I thought of Listra, and held my peace.

"Now, though the matter never reached the ears of Monteza whilst I remained awake," pursued the Sleeper, "it someway came to the knowledge of my brother, Mattoni the priest, when I was in my fortieth year, giving him great concern. He foresaw, as well as I, the direful result of my folly, if persisted in, and strove to turn me from it, but in vain.

"In desperation he avowed that sooner than see me come to disgrace and death, he would cast me into a sleeping trance, nor wake me from it till either the King or Queen were dead. I laughed and said:

"'"'Tis not a bad thought of thine, brother. But if thou dost so, lay me in the Grotto sacred to Truth, for there none of my enemies may come at me to do me a hurt whilst I sleep!'

"'Mirthful words full often come true,' said Mattoni gravely, 'and I will bear thy wish in mind if ever I carry out my threat, though I must warn thee that the Priests of Truth aver that whosoever sleepeth in the Grotto beyond the lifetime of a man shall wake not until the time of the last King of Atlantis.'

"'I care not for priestly prophecies,' I said, 'my own right arm hath ever proved my staunchest friend, as well thou knowest, brother; and even were the tale true, thou wouldst waken me before I had slept so long, which no man could. But why talk we as men full of wine and folly? Let us speak of present things. Goest thou to-morrow to the Isle of Olives with me? Olasin hath promised to be ready to start at morn, and nowhere have we such excellent fishing!'

"'I will come to the palace for thee ere the dawn hath opened thine eyes!' answered my priest-brother, with a hidden meaning that I found not for a thousand years, and then we parted to meet no more until our spirits find each other in the Shadows. I went to my apartments that night, to supper with the Queen, and sank into an easy slumber. I know not any more until I heard thy voice commanding me to awake, and I came to new life as thou saw'st me, in my own land still, it is true; but to find it sadly shrunken in its size and all its people strangers to me.

"What became of the King my master, of the Queen my mistress, or of my brothers, I know not; nor is anyone alive who can tell me, but I can frame some sort of story regarding them that I think is likely to be true. There is more in priestly magic than I thought, and I believe that my brother, coming to my room in the early morn, threw me into a senseless sleep, afterwards causing me to be conveyed to the Sacred Grotto. Once there, I believe that the Priests of Truth, in accordance with their tradition, and, it may be with an eye to notoriety and wealth should it be fulfilled, kept all people from me, refusing even the King admittance. Then I must imagine that Mattoni, who alone had power to recall me to life, died suddenly before it could be done. Thus I account for my long, deep sleep, though at best 'tis only a plausible tale."

"So plausible that 'tis likely to be the true one," I said, "and showeth that the Spirits work their will in their own

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way, heeding not our lives or wishes in the reaching of their aims. Yet it would ill become me to murmur, whom they have blessed with all that heart desires and more than hope once dared to hope for. Their will be done."

"Their will be done," re-echoed my companion; and then, the story ended, we sat there together in silence, busy with our own thoughts, till night had shrouded the shore with a faint darkness and menacing storm-clouds gathered overhead. I was about to remark that 'twas time to be up and away, when suddenly and clearly, my ears caught the well-known sound of oars dipping in the water. I whispered caution to the others, and carrying Alcis, still asleep in my arms, stepped down to the inshore sand and there listened, endeavouring to find the whereabouts of the boat that dared intrude on our fishing place.

The sound ceased, but almost at the moment there came the noise of someone crashing through the undergrowth of the dell, as if pressing towards us from the outer shore of the little promontory. Back again, up the graded slope I strode, till I caught the sheen of the sea behind the trees, and saw a score of moving figures flitting about in the shadowy shelter.

"Hold, there!" I cried, "and give an account of your-

The Sleeper and Arac fell to the earth.

selves for trespassing on the King's preserves. Know you not that this is our especial fishing ground?"

For answer came a mocking laugh, and in angrier tones I repeated my command, and Marenso ordered them, in the name of King Arnon and his Chief Minister, to show themselves: one replied derisively that he knew no such authority. Intending to lay Alcis on the soft turf to be out of danger, I called to Arac and Marenso to go forward and discover who these knaves were, but at the same time an order was given to the mysterious band in the Atlantian tongue and in a voice that was strangely familiar to me: there was a twanging of bow-strings and the whistle of arrows and the Sleeper and Arac fell to the earth pierced through with the feathered shafts. I also should have fallen there, dead, shot through the heart, but that the body of little Alcis, still pressed to my breast, received and stayed the fatal arrow that was speeding straight to my vital part. It scratched the skin beneath my tunic as it was, but that was all. Yet at what a cost was I saved!

The little body in my arms quivered a moment and gave a little cry, then stiffened out and was still for ever. Tenderly I laid him down, that youngest son of mine, my gentle Alcis, who in dying had saved my own life, and with dagger in hand, rushed towards the foe, feeling in that instant of mingled grief and rage, like a lioness robbed of her cubs. How I cursed the love of ease that had lately grown on me and made me leave my famous sword in the palace! With that in my grasp I could face and slay a score of enemies, but now I had only a short, sharp-pointed knife wherewith to strive against an unknown force.

In the mad blindness of my advance my feet caught the prostrate body of Arac, and, stumbling, I fell headlong to the ground. In a moment, 'mid a shower of arrows, I was afoot again, only to be thrown to earth again over the fallen form of Marenso. As I went down the second time, cursing loudly, footsteps clustered round, voices sounded, heavy blows rained fast upon me, and one, catching me full on the head, made a thousand stars dance redly before my eyes and caused my brain to reel. Yet I was not utterly unconscious after it, for I heard a medley of tongues consulting over me, and a firm, clear order given in the voice that sounded so familiar, but which I could not recognize; then came the sound of footsteps dying away in the distance, and all was still.

When all had gone I rose to my feet—slowly and with keen pain, for I felt as though I had fallen from a great height upon rough stones so bruised and aching was my carcase—and followed their track to the seashore, stumbling often and groaning with agony at every step. At last, with a great effort, I reached the sea, to find, as I expected, my unknown enemies gone.

There were few stars visible through the murky cloud-rack that moved along o'erhead, and no moon, but a faint phosphorescence shone on the waves and lit up the leaden-hued horizon, showing me, in a hasty, searching glance, a full-rigged sailing vessel, far away in the offing, now vanishing like a phantom craft.

Now, though I could fain have laid me down on the wet sand and writhed in torture, I remembered that I was a king and that 'twas never the way of Didron's son to cry out at pain or give way to it, and back again I struggled through the belt of mangroves, to where my son lay lifeless by the water's brink. The fatal arrow was still in his little body, and with a heart sore with grief and a mind black with rage, I drew it forth and held it a moment in my hand, standing as one dazed.

Just as I would have hurled it, spitefully, into the waters of the creek, a brilliant glare of light lit up the dimness, showing me, in one swift look, the figure of a cross cut on the shaft, and under it, graven in the written characters of our tongue, the name of Listra, Princess of Aidè! Then the thunder bellowed forth its reverberating roar and darkness settled down upon me, while the flood-gates of the sky were opened and the rain fell in soaking torrents.

How shall I describe the storm that raged within my soul that night? which raged so fiercely that I heeded the howling tempest around, and its lightning flashes splitting the veil of its ebon shade, even less than on a careless day I would have heeded the idlest zephyr that ever ruffled the curls of my raven hair. So swiftly and tumultuously tossed the thoughts within my aching head, that at last, worn out alike with mental and with bodily anguish, I fell upon the sodden, steaming ground, and with one arm clasping little Alcis, sank into a fevered sleep.

* * * * *

Meantime, Briseis, growing troubled at my long absence, questioned Valdo regarding my safety many times, and sent, with some of the Royal Guard, when the storm broke in its fury, to see that I was brought to the palace before any harm could befall me. This command my faithful retainer hastened gladly to obey, so that when I woke from my troubled sleep it was to find myself in my own apartment, watched and tended by my own dear Queen, even as she had watched and tended me long years agone, when I lay, a helpless fugitive, in her fair and stately mansion.

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Her eyes were red with weeping now, and on the queenly head was set the chaplet of dead dwarf ferns, the sign of a great bereavement.

"Methought thou wert never going to wake, my Arnon," said she, smiling fondly at me for all her sorrow; "and I began to fear I should need to mourn a double loss. Thou hast lain here two days since my servants brought you in."

"All too long to be idle when vengeance should be afoot," I answered, "for the foe hath a good start. How say the priests that I favour for recovery?"

"Passing well," said Briseis, "for Unim vouches that within three days thou wilt be well. And fret not, dear one, of vengeance. I have seen the death-shaft and read the name upon it, and already the priests and soldiers everywhere are searching the land, and offering reward for the finding of the traitress, while a hundred swift-sailing ships are scouring the seas around."

"Art a Queen indeed, wife," I said, "and never was King blessed with one so tactful and so true. But what have they done with the dead?"

"They lie in state, here in the palace, for the people to see them ere they are buried, and Unim says that until thou art able to inter them so that the prophecy may be fulfilled they must remain."

"Strange are the mercies of They who rule!" I said in the bitterness of my heart, when the dread words of that prophecy came back to me and shattered at a blow my hopes and dreams of peace and plenty in a long, calm future for my name and race; "it seemeth to me that They can have no care for human suffering, so reckless are They in inflicting it."

"Speak not ill of the Spirits, husband," said Briseis gently, "for thee have They favoured above all men in many things, and wouldst thou have all the world bow down to minister to thy every wish?"

"I am rebuked," I answered humbly, and wearily also, for I was yet weak, "but woman's faith was ever deeper, more unquestioning, than man's. Mind'st thou, dear one, the last time thou piously reproved my grumblings?"

She answered: "Yes," and, casting herself beside me on the couch we mingled our tears and talked awhile. From then I grew better and was soon able to be up and about, and attending with fitting dignity to the affairs of the nation.

Rumour and fear were abroad, unsettling the minds of the people, and the words of the prophecy were once more bruited about, and passed from lip to lip with lightning speed. It needed all my sternness and all the Queen's persuasive grace to keep our subjects from a panic of affright. The coming evil, the predicted end of the land, gave great excuse to the disaffected and the criminal, who wanted only a chance to raise and plunder the wealthy nobles, and afterwards pillage, burn, and slay to their hearts' content. I increased my army to be in readiness for any outbreak, and would have made the rich lords disgorge some of their ill-gotten gain, but these last were too strong for peaceful measures, and I could not compel them save by bringing on the terror that I feared.

Secretly, in the dead of night, I and the Priests of Truth buried the body of the Sleeper in the Sacred Grotto near the half-submerged ruins of Miropis, putting him deep down under the place where the costly couch had been. In the flashing light of the thousand lamps, at the bottom of the vast inverted cone, we laid him down for his last earthly rest, and at his side, with eyes blinded with tears, I placed my youngest son, my gentle, tender Alcis. In the right hand of each we placed the piece of money that must be paid at the entrance to the Garden of Pleasure—the Passport Piece 'tis called—and there left them together in silence, the old and the young, the general of King Monteza and the son of King Arnon, between whose births stretched an age of more than a thousand years.

Then all the priests drew away to their own apartments, save Unim, with whom I left the inside of the Grotto, and climbed up its outer stair to the summit. At the top we stood and talked, taking counsel together what course it were wise to pursue in face of the threatening danger.

"Repeat to me again the words of the prediction that is told regarding Marenso, who sleeps his last sleep beneath us," I said.

"See, the dawn is breaking," he answered evasively; "were it not better to leave it unspoken?"

"Tell it me now, I charge thee," I repeated. "As thy King, I command; as thy friend I entreat."

"For the latter tie between us I will grant thy request," said Unim, "but not for Kings may the servant of the Spirits be compelled against his will. Thus runneth the old saying: 'It is foretold that whoso wakes the Sleeper shall bury him, dead truly, in this very spot, and whoso reigneth as King of Atlantis in the day that the Sleeper dies, that King shall be the last that shall reign in this land and the end of the land itself shall not be far away. In those same words I told it to thee the first time that thou entered the Grotto, and one other thing I told thee, namely, that till thou hadst been here a third time, to fear not death."

"And the third time has come and gone!" I said. "So be it. At least I am forewarned, and will take good care of my skin from now, for I love this life, despite its evils, better than the prospect of the unknown shadows. Say, priest, can'st foretell my future now?"

Unim was silent for a space, looking up into the dome of heaven. Then he spoke, saying:

"As I told thee, Arnon, once before, I could uplift the veil so that nothing of thy remaining life should be hidden from thee, but I refused then as I refuse now, lest thy eyes be blinded and thy mind unsettled by the sight. 'Tis not well for any of the sons of men to probe too far into the secrets of existence and of destiny, and though I have the power, I have never sought to know my own end. Enough for the time is the evil and the good that cometh in its due season: enough for the present our present weal and woe."

"Art wise, my priest," I observed, "but *I* would dare to know all, had *I* the power. However, as I cannot compel thee, I must bear my soul in patience. Thinkest thou, then, that I shall be the last King of Atlantis, and that it is already doomed?"

"I think so truly," returned Unim; "for even now the sea hath gained great stretches of the land and is rising faster this last month than it has ever done before. The time will surely come, and that before many years, when the highest hills in our seagirt land will be fathoms deep under the ocean waves, and other countries may send their fleets unheeding over a waste of waters where now these fertile fields are lying."

I looked out over the pleasing landscape, reposing calm and lovely under the paling stars, and glinted here and there with gleams of coming day, and the awfulness of the desolation foreshadowed wrung a deep groan from the depths of my heart.

"Ye Spirits!" I cried, "can it be that all this land and all its citizens are doomed, and that its name and their memory shall be wiped from the earth?"

"The Spirits have given and the Spirits have power to take away," said Unim gravely; "and what the Spirit of Truth declares is just." After a long pause he went on again: "Thy duty as King, Arnon, is to face the danger fearlessly, so that the trembling thousands may take heart at thy courage and prepare to meet the avertless doom as men. Already the people clamour for the building of more ships that the province of Ulmeca may be re-conquered and so prove a refuge for them in their hour of need. I would advise that thou dost double the fleet at once and keep the builders ever at the task of making new vessels, strong and swift. So, at least, will thy subjects be pacified, even though it be labour spent in vain."

"Why should it be in vain?" I asked, for though I was loth to put my hands to war again, I was ready so to do if

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thereby I could save my people from the overwhelming horror.

"Have I not refused to lift the veil?" said Unim abruptly, "and wouldst thou know the end of all men? Did I not tell thee once that thou wouldst die in the arms of the sea that thou lov'st so well? What moré wouldst ask?"

"Naught," I answered, "from one so chary of his knowledge!"

My heart was still sore with grief at my recent loss, and heavy with the weight of future fear, and full of resentment at the Fates, so I parted from the Priest of Truth in an ill-temper and went away with scant courtesy, nor have I set foot within or upon the Sacred Grotto since that sorrowful day.

CHAPTER XXV.

The Gathering of the Waters.

Slowly passed the first few months of the year, with the sea ever rising, and each day bringing fresh news of some shoreside hamlet or harbour submerged and deserted, some low-lying harvest land covered over with the salt waves. The people flocked to the cities and towns by hundreds and by thousands, and Kronos itself, where the waters encroached least, was now swollen to twice its former size, its streets of half finished dwellings stretching far out upon the plain.

From lowland to upland the populace retreated, from little villages to larger towns, as though safety lay in numbers—as yet all orderly, a panic being prevented by the influence of the priests, and aided by the knowledge that the builders of ships were working in relays by night and day, and that my wealth and that of many nobles was flowing like water to equip such a fleet as would enable us to retake our lost provinces and seek a refuge there for all whom their native land could not hold in future.

Many recovered courage when they saw my energy, and for a time we kept the rebellious and dishonest classes down. But nevertheless I knew that Atlantis was honey-combed with discontent at the loss of wonted luxuries, and that, deprived of her pampering wealth, she was no longer the great nation she once had been.

The hour of her prime was past and the knell of her downfall was already sounding in her ears.

With all my public cares I found time to go aboard the *Ravager*, and with her to sweep the seas to East and West for sign of the mysterious craft that had come upon us so silently in the gloaming, and from whence came the archer and the arrow that had slain my Alcis.

My search was vain as that of the other vessels out upon the same quest; vain as the effort of the Dreamers to find the secret of the Foodless Life.* I voyaged towards Nubia and back again to the shores of Ulmeca; I ventured far into the chilly north and southward upon the wide bosom of the tropic sea; I voyaged through calm and storm and wind and rain, under a burning sun, and under a cold and starry sky, but not a trace of that strange craft could I discover.

It had vanished as completely as though the sea had swallowed it up in the thunderstorm that burst when I lost sight of it, and so, indeed, I grew to believe in time, until there came the rude awakening.

Once upon my journeyings, I cast anchor in the bay of the little isle in the southern sea, where, in the past, I had so often started forth on pirate cruise in the self-same ship.

I landed on the well-remembered island, where still remained the ruins of the pirate settlement, but no sign of human life was left save the grass-grown plot of land where Viol and I had laid old Didron to his last long rest.

My mind teeming with the recollections of that time which still possesses a charm for me, despite my present abhorrence of sea-robbery, I wandered alone over the fairy isle, visiting the places of my youthful frolics, the paths in the dense, dark woods, the pebbly watercourses on the little hills, the sandy beaches and the tree-sheltered inlets of the palm-fringed coast, and especially that lovely little bay of shingle, where the limestone crags, all overgrown with creepers, jutted out into the emerald sea, and where the tiny breakers curved and fell with ceaseless murmur on the shelving shallows.

'Twas there I pighted my troth to my sweet and dainty Viol; 'twas there I parted from her for the last time; 'twas there I last saw my little Didron, and stroked his curly locks with my great rough hand.

"And now," thought I, "I have another bride, who is the Queen, and another son whose name is Didron. And now I am the King and have well-nigh driven all the pirates off the sea. So strange are life's changes!"

Thus thinking, sitting on the stone where Viol and I had so often sat in the byegone years, I lost my count of time, and was there when the sun went down on the edge of the sea, and the night-birds and insects began to chirp and twitter in the forest at my back. There was no moon, and many of the stars were obscured by clouds scurrying across the heavens, while a light sea-breeze played with my raven hair and fanned my bronzed and beaten visage.

My head nodded, and I dozed, and it seemed to me that out of the semi-darkness and the lulling sounds was fashioned a vision, and a symphony; a vision of Atlantis as she had been, and a symphony of spirit-music such as I had heard in the Temple of Karnac in the land of Khem.

Fancy, it may have been, or real, but this was what I saw mirrored on the pall of the tropic night:

Out of the darkness grew a sudden brilliancy, lighter then day, yet mellowed so that there was no glare to vex my eyes; and out of the stillness came a burst of melody, so loud that it filled my ears, yet softened so that I could have listened to it gladly for ever.

I thought that I was still near the bay, though I seemed to have no form or resting-place, when slowly the sea began to recede from the shore and the land rose from beneath, not sandy or damp, but covered with forests and fields, and full of strange animals roaming in their shades as though there had been no ocean there for a long time.

Following the retreating waters with my gaze, for I was not conscious of any motion, I saw that they kept on till the shores of Atlantis were reached, and between the little isle and the great land there was no more sea.

Then I saw the coast of Atlantis itself spread out, swallowing up the flying ocean to east and west, till but a narrow strait remained on either hand between it and the mighty continents that now are leagues and leagues away.

There were no cities ortowns in all its breadth then, only roving hordes of naked barbarians, fighting for their food with the savage beasts that roamed the plains or sheltered in the caves, using only rude stone implements, and eating their own slain.

But from the great land of the East, to the north of Nubia, came a swarming multitude of men, under strong and powerful chiefs whom their followers revered, skilled in the making of weapons and tools of copper and bronze, who overran the land before them like a colony of ants. Whenever their chiefs or great men died, they buried them deep in the earth, raising conical mounds above them, the largest above the greatest chiefs, and, though they had a spoken language, they had but scanty written words.

Now, at the shore of the great East land this nation split in twain, one division journeying to the south, and settling in the land that is now called Khem, or Egypt, and the other crossing the narrow strait and landing on the coast of Nubia, there multiplying greatly, driving the barbarians before them across the country from east to west, and so into what is now Ulmeca, settling down on the land they had conquered and becoming a great nation.

Then the sea fought back the shore again, and the

*We have only one other record of this strange sect of visionaries, but from what can be gathered it appears that they endeavoured to live their lives asleep, so as to dispense with food.

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straits widened slowly through many thousand years, till Atlantis appeared as it was when Marenso lived at Monteza's Court.

Now I know how it came about that the Egyptians buried their kings in lofty pyramids, as we did our own, and how it was that I could understand their speech so well and read their writing so easily, for a great way back our people were of the same stock, having the same customs and the same tongue.

Whilst I was yet pondering over this strange kinship, the scene darkened, then brightened again, and I saw Atlantis as it was when first I ravaged its shores and levied toll upon its wealthy sea-board towns.

Again the darkness blotted out the vision from my view, a darkness full of strange noises and mysterious mutterings, as of the entrance to the Shadows, and when the veil lifted and I looked again, I saw only a wide, wild waste of waters, heaving and tossing, and moaning, as it were, a dreary funereal dirge for the glory that was gone for ever, for the land that was buried under its waves, for the nation that was no more to be numbered among the nations of the earth.

I felt sick at heart, and the tears would have started from my eyes, had I a bodily form, when the light waned, the music died away in ghostly cadences, a sensation as of running fire shot through all my veins, and I awoke to find the night but little more advanced than when the phantasm first appeared before me.

The sea-breeze was still swaying the palms and cocoas with a soughing rustle, the little breakers were still curling on the sloping sands, dark clouds were still drifting filmily under the stars, and rousing myself resolutely and throwing off the influence of the dream, I sought out the encampment of my men, and next morning put forth to sea in the *Ravager*, steering straight for home.

Moody and silent I stood on the prow as the good ship clove the waters of the sun-kissed sea, plunging now through belts of yellow weed where little crabs thrived in countless swarms, now passing schools of porpoises, now followed by keen-jawed, evil-looking sharks with dorsal fins in air, and anon becalmed and making progress only with the oars.

Orlanis and the others thought I took my grief to heart, I trow, but said never a word to my face, only hinting that it was not needful for a king to work his ships. To this I answered shortly that a king could do as he pleased with his own.

When nearly half-way to our journey's end, as I was climbing the ladder to my solitary post in the first flush of the dawn, I espied a single sail to the eastward, low down on the larboard bow, scudding along with all canvas spread.

My lethargy vanished as by magic, and in less time than I had ever done it before I had the *Ravager's* head turned, and every stitch of her sails set and all her oars going in rhythmic, quick-succeeding strokes. Swiftly as a flying-fish through the air, we bore down on the strange craft, which showed no flag in response to our unfurling of the Royal Banner and seemed anxious only to get beyond our reach.

It was a long, stern chase, but the tough old *Ravager*, under her Egyptian rigging, gained on her quarry length by length, and fathom by fathom, the high-flung spray from her foaming prow dashing its briny drops into my weathered face with boisterous good-will.

We neared the fast-flying pirate-craft—for such she was—and scanning her spars and lines as we advanced, I saw that she was not the ship I sought. Still, I resolved to capture her, if only to add to my fleet, and bade the boarders get ready their grappling hooks. The distance lessened, and our ram at length came near touching the stranger's stern, when suddenly a big, burly form rose up from behind the bulwarks, an old, weather-tanned pirate, with scarred and sunburnt face, and hair and beard white as the driven snow.

"Tirhak the Pirate! By all the gods!" I cried. "Hold men, and sheath your weapons. This is no enemy of mine."

"Right glad am I to hear those words," said the tough old man, "and had I heard them sooner would not have fled from you. But, methinks, King Arnon, we have given the *Ravager* a sturdy chase."

"True, Tirhak," I answered, "but you know of old that Didron's ship had no match among the freebooters of the sea, while now I'll warrant she can outpace anything of timber that is afloat. But bring your bows up, and let me come aboard, that I may talk with you to better advantage."

"That will I," said he, and swung his vessel round with eagerness. Orlanis would have gone with me, but I preferred to go alone, trusting a sailor's honour more than armed protection. It was with a strange feeling that I stepped on board amongst that pirate crew, tall, strong, lusty fellows, grizzled and battle-worn, and reeking of the salt sea, and their talk full of fearless oaths as a shark's mouth of teeth; the last remnant of the old sea-dogs, whose tacit sovereign had been Didron, my foster father.

King though I was, they welcomed me with hearty good-will, though with none of the servile cringing of the landfolk, and I sighed, almost wishing that I were once more one of them.

"You see, my men have not forgotten the name of one who was once their comrade," said white-haired Tirhak, "though 'tis over thirty years since I spoke you last on the seas. 'Twas different, then, when we pirates were reckoned passable men and our calling was a decent one. Now we are outlaws, and well-nigh banished from the ocean."

"'Tis so," said I, "yet I think it is for the best; though I sometimes long for the old days. Tell me, Tirhak, wherefore you came not openly to me at Kronos, instead of ranging these solitary waters, where no commerce now comes?"

The old man shook his head.

"I was a pirate when Dulo IX. sat on the throne, I was a pirate when Dulo X. ruled, I was one still when Briseis reigned, and I would fain be free to rove the seas as heretofore until I die, even though Didron's son be King of Atlantis.

"Also, I fought against you, though you saw me not, in the great battle of the ships, where you slew the boasting Thaska—Ha! ha. I roared till the tears came in my eyes when I heard of it!—and defeated the fleet of Quitzaal; and I feared your anger when I knew you were victorious, and remembered the language I used to you when I saw you on the slave-ship."

"Comrades should ever be careless of each other's tongues," I said, "and it was never in the nature of Arnon to bear malice for idle words."

"That I should have known," said Tirhak, "the more so, seeing that you are wedded to our gentle Queen, whom even we rough seamen would cherish and protect. And pray how fares it with the little ones?"

My brow clouded instantly, and I told him of the ship that had come out of the darkness and slain my youngest child, my friend, and my servant, and how fruitless was my search.

"'Twas a foul deed!" cried the old seaman, whose hands were red with many a deed of carnage, but who always struck fairly and in the light of day; "'twas a foul deed, and I would fain run down the strange craft if she be on these seas."

"Wilt search her out for me?" I asked, "if I give you my royal seal for safety and a warrant for food and stores in my name at any port you put in at? 'Twill be a light task, but one after your own heart. For myself, 'tis time I sat once more in Kronos."

"Will I?" echoed the pirate, his aged cheeks aglow with the prospect of active service. "Will I? I am your servant henceforth, and we will seek out and bring you this

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cowardly enemy though we scour every league of the ocean for her. Say you not so, my men?"

A ringing cheer rose from his crew, one and all agreeing to aid their captain in his quest.

"And now I will aboard my *Ravager*," I said, "unless you bring your vessel with me to Kronos for a rest."

"My resting place is here, on the free waves," answered Tirhak, "and I love not the life of cities. But one thing I would like before you leave—to see and test your famous sword, the repute of which has travelled far."

I drew "Sunderer's" shining length from its gem-set sheath at once, and gave it to him, enjoining caution in the handling of it.

"'Tis keen," he said, thumbing its edge in a way that would have made a novice to swordcraft sick, "and rings true, and is fair to look upon. I would give a year of the little life that remains to me for the having of it. By the beard of Amarunth, I would make it sing before the eyes of a few! See, comrades, how the metal shines blue, without a blemish in it."

With admiration not unmixed with awe, the blade was passed from hand to hand, the rough sailors handling it as gently as a woman tends her babe, and from the last one I received it, putting it back into its case with pardonable pride.

"I have sworn that henceforth it shall never leave me while I have strength to grasp it," I said, seeing Tirhak eyeing it greedily, "and now I must be saying, fare-you-well."

"Farewell," the old pirate answered, as I went on board my ship again and the vessels parted, one going north and one west. For a long time I could hear the sturdy seamen chanting the Ina-Ana in chorus loud and strong, its well-remembered melody floating to us across the sunlit waters with a soft, subdued, yet sonorous sound.

It was near the ruins of Miropis where we first sighted the Atlantian coast, but there was no anchorage or harbour left; even the place where the town itself had been was a fathom under the sea, and the tide's lowest ebb only uncovered the base of the Sacred Grotto. We looked at each other, I and my crew, with pale, awed faces, and saying never a word, put about and ran along the new shore-line towards Kronos, fearing lest that, too, should have been submerged in our absence, and longing to know the worst.

As we went our misgivings first increased and then diminished, for after finding that in many places the sea had gained even more than at Miropis, we saw, in nearing the capital, that the country rose gradually until the coast at last assumed its familiar form, and our keel ploughed the track of old time pursued by the home-coming ships.

But all along the shore was written desolation in letters of ruin, mutely eloquent. The villages lay dismantled and deserted, the fields were lonely, the little harbours empty, or strewn with upturned fishing boats settling down into the yellow sand, and not a sail, not a galley, not a pleasure-barque, tacked off or on the jagged line of land and water. All told of hasty flight from the ocean's resistless advance.

And so, filled with sore forboding, we hove to in the Bay of Kronos, where was gathered the fleet of seven hundred vessels, and there cast anchor and went ashore.

How gladly my Briseis welcomed me home again! vowing how solitary her life had been whilst I was away, and declaring, with all a loving woman's inconsistency, in one and the same breath, that she wished I had found the deadly foe and that she was glad I had been spared the shedding of blood!

"'Tis wearisome work," she said, "to deal with Didron and Vesta when you are not here, and to stop their constant questionings about our little Alcis. 'Twould break my heart to tell them the truth, and yet what can I say?"

We were in our own apartments then, and the two were playing with an ebon image, a little distance away.

"Come hither," I cried to them, and when they came, lifted them both upon my knees. "Should you like to know where your brother Alcis is?" I asked.

"I should; I *want* to know," said sturdy Didron, clutching my beard.

"I think you ought to tell us," echoed imperious little Vesta, looking at me reproachfully with her great round eyes.

"Well," I said, "he has gone to a far country where nothing dies and all the land is a garden, full of sweet-scented flowers and ripe fruit, and where all his playfellows are always merry and happy."

"But the slaves whisper that he has gone to the Shadows, like old Marenso and Arac," persisted Vesta, doubtfully.

"Then I shall be very angry with the slaves," I said, hiding my emotion with a show of displeasure, "and you must not listen to them. Arac has been buried by his people, and Marenso in the Sacred Grotto, but I saw your little brother last, before he went to the far country."

"Can we go to him some day?" asked Didron, "'cause I should like to see him again. And you, mother, and you, father, will come with us, won't you?"

"We may go sooner than you think," I answered, choking down the lump that rose in my throat, "all of us, and then we shall be parted no more."

"And will Phrena, and his father and mother be there, too?" queried Vesta, thinking of the only son of Atris.

"Yes, dear one, some day we shall all meet in that garden of delight," said Briseis.

"But I wish I had known, so that I could have wished him good-bye till then," Vesta said regretfully.

For answer I kissed them both, and setting them down, bade them go and play again.

"'Twill need not the Priest of Truth to absolve us from the sin of that half-falsehood," I said to Briseis, who looked at me with tear-filled eyes, yet answered bravely:

"No, indeed. And were it for some other cause, one could scarce forbear to laugh at Vesta's ready tongue! How quiet they are, now!"

"Too quiet," I replied. "Ho, there!" I called to the two, "send for Phrena to come and make merry with you, and be as noisy as you like! Run, jump, dance, sing, so you sound as many as of yore and I do not miss the absent one!"

They laughed, clapping their hands with delight, and soon the palace resounded with the pleasing notes of their childish amusement, and I felt more at ease.

(To be continued.)

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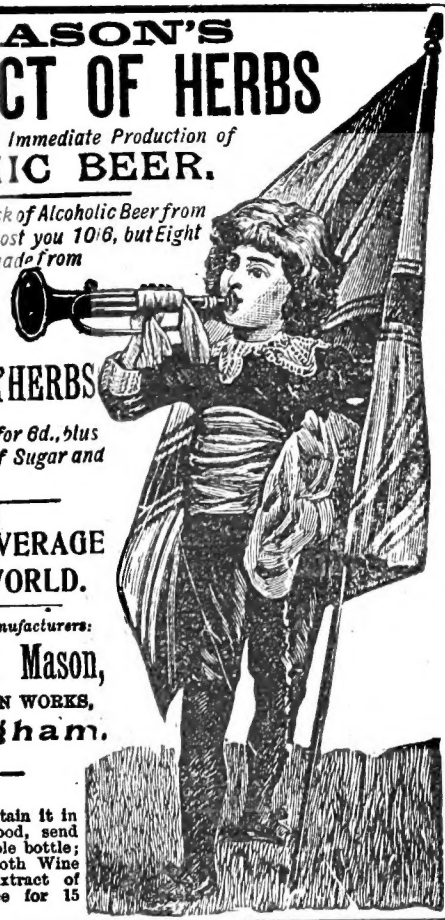

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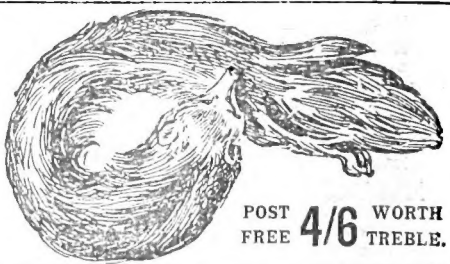

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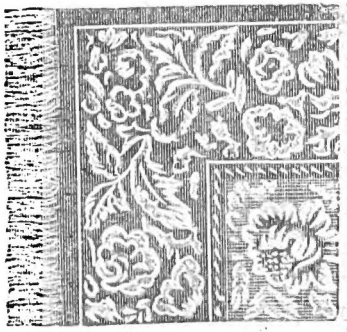

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